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Reimagining Disillusionment: A Re-evaluation of Return Migration in Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones*

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the phenomenon of return migration among African subjects who, having established lives in Western contexts, voluntarily repatriate to their ancestral homelands. Conventional scholarship often frames return migration through a prism of failure, positing that returnees are individuals unable to realize aspirations in the West and consequently seek refuge from frustration and disappointment in their countries of origin. However, this study diverges from such interpretations by focusing on the experiences of African returnees who, despite achieving a degree of comfort and integration in the West, encounter profound disillusionment upon re-entry into their home societies. These returnees frequently confront a complex nexus of challenges, including but not limited to, socio-cultural reintegration deficits, economic precarity, persistent issues of insurgency and terrorism, governance deficiencies, systemic corruption, and overwhelming societal pressures. The recurrence and exacerbation of these antecedent conditions, which often served as initial impetuses for outward migration, lead to a profound re-evaluation of their decision to return. Employing migration theory as its guiding analytical framework, this study undertakes a novel re-reading of Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones*. This approach aims to elucidate the multifaceted dimensions of disillusionment experienced by these return migrants, thereby offering a counter-narrative to prevailing scholarly interpretations of the primary text. Ultimately, this research posits a direct correlation between the challenges faced by returnees and the broader developmental trajectories of their home countries. It contends that pervasive issues such as economic and political instability, terrorism, corruption, and unfulfilled social expectations significantly impede successful return migration and, by extension, national development.

Keywords: Return Migration, Disillusionment, Postcolonial Africa, Nuruddin Farah, *Crossbones*, Insurgency, Terrorism, Migration Theory.

Introduction

The phenomenon of return migration among African subjects, particularly those who have achieved a measure of success in Western nations, presents a compelling yet under-examined area of scholarly inquiry. While a longing for home often accompanies the migrant experience, the reality of repatriation frequently deviates sharply from idealized expectations. Returnees often find their ancestral homelands either stagnated in, or exacerbated by, the very conditions that initially prompted their departure, leading to profound disillusionment. This disillusionment is frequently compounded by the social and political realities they encounter, including, but not limited to, internal conflicts, pervasive insecurity, economic hardship, and systemic governance failures.

This paper critically examines literary representations of these complex experiences in Nuruddin Farah's 2011 novel, *Crossbones*. Specifically, it investigates how Farah's portrayal of various characters reflects the multifaceted challenges faced by African returnees within contemporary African social and political landscapes. The analysis explores how the text dramatizes socio-cultural integration difficulties, economic precarity, the persistent threats of insurgency and terrorism, the implications of poor leadership and corruption, the burdens of societal pressure, and overarching feelings of disillusionment that characterize the returnee narrative.

This study posits that a rigorous analysis of such literary accounts is crucial for a deeper understanding of the African returnee experience, a subject whose complexities remain largely unexplored within both local and global scholarly discourse. While the broader phenomenon of outward migration from Africa, particularly towards Western destinations, has garnered extensive global attention, the equally significant and often fraught experiences of return migration warrant urgent and sustained academic scrutiny.

Several factors influence the decision to return, including the perceived political and social stability of the home country, economic opportunities (or lack thereof), and the ability of emigrants to achieve financial targets abroad that facilitate their reintegration. Furthermore, access to quality healthcare, social entitlements for retirees, strong familial bonds, and societal expectations of triumphant return often serve as significant pull factors. However, as Ada Guisti notes, the welfare and future prospects of children—encompassing stable economies, access to education, and protection from violence—frequently serve as paramount determinants for migrants opting to remain in host countries (Guisti, 2013, p. 139). The context of Somalia, a nation with one of the largest refugee populations globally (UNHCR, 2014), provides a particularly poignant backdrop for exploring these migratory complexities, hence the selection of Farah's *Crossbones*, which is set in this geopolitical space.

While scholarly interest has predominantly focused on migration to the West and its associated discontents, there is a conspicuous paucity of research on the discontents of return migration. This academic gap demands immediate attention, especially given the persistent economic, political, and social instabilities characterizing many African nations that continue to fuel migratory flows. Moreover, the attitudes and behaviours of host communities towards returnees significantly impact the success or failure of reintegration. This paper underscores the fundamental notion that, irrespective of the duration of residence abroad, Africa remains the foundational homeland for people of African descent, emphasizing the unique challenges and obligations inherent in their return.

Previous critical engagements with Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* (2011) have predominantly framed the novel as a commentary on deprivation, destruction, and chaos within Somalia, often in relation to the global distribution of commodities, military equipment, and humanitarian aid (Rizzuto, 2017, p. 393). Other interpretations have explored the text through the lens of media technologies and Somali politics (Rizzuto, 2017, p. 421) or as a subversion of crime fiction conventions to articulate Somalia's complex, multifaceted reality (Naicker, 2017, p. 17). While these readings are illuminating, they do

not offer a comprehensive analysis of the text in terms of the specific disillusionments associated with return migration.

This paper fills this critical lacuna by undertaking a focused analysis of the returnee experience in *Crossbones*. As William Safran (1999) observes, while a homeland may physically exist, it often fails to be a welcoming space with which returnees can identify politically, ideologically, or socially, rendering the process of leaving the diaspora traumatic (p. 91). This paper therefore seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of these challenges, contributing significantly to the burgeoning field of return migration studies and deepening critical engagement with Farah's significant literary contributions.

Literature Review

Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* (2011) has garnered scholarly attention primarily for its nuanced portrayal of contemporary Somalia. Critics often highlight Farah's broader thematic concerns, such as the comparison between Somalia's erstwhile tranquility and its present state of geopolitical turmoil. Farah, a celebrated cosmopolitan writer, frequently imbues his narratives with a sensibility that advocates for global educational and cultural influences, a characteristic common among contemporary African diaspora authors (Farah, 2011).

Nicole Rizzuto's analysis of *Crossbones* provides a detailed examination of the systemic deprivation experienced by the populations of Somaliland and Somalia, contextualizing this within the intricate global interchange of commodities, military equipment, and humanitarian aid (Rizzuto 2011, 393). Rizzuto further interprets the novel as a mediation on materiality, filtering noise and recording sound as a consequence of Somalia's fraught political landscape. He asserts that *Crossbones* "challenges politico-economic discourses that reduce Somalia's marginalization from the world system to a single cause failed statehood and literary critical discourses of world literature based on unfettered connection, translation and flow" (Rizzuto 2011, 421). While Rizzuto's reading offers significant insights into the novel's engagement with global political economy and its

critique of dominant narratives, its primary focus diverges from the central concern of this present study: the multifaceted disillusionments encountered by return migrants.

Similarly, Kamil Naicker argues that *Crossbones* strategically undermines the conventional structures of crime fiction to underscore the intricate and often paradoxical nature of Somalia. Naicker posits that the novel resists simplistic, monolithic narratives and challenges binary, often Orientalist, media representations of the country. In her assessment, "Crime fiction conventions are abandoned, as Farah declines to paint his characters as unequivocal villains or victims. This erosion of caricature contributes to an open-ended 'unfinished' narrative which privileges nuance over cohesion" (Naicker 2015, 17). While Naicker's work is invaluable for understanding Farah's narrative innovation and political critique, its analytical lens does not extend to the specific experiences of return migration to Africa, which is the crux of this research.

The relatively recent publication of *Crossbones* (2011) may account for the comparative scarcity of in-depth scholarly work on the text. This study aims to contribute significantly to this emergent body of literature by offering a focused examination of *Crossbones* as a compelling literary exploration of return migration and its inherent disillusionments. Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo offers a relevant reading that connects *Crossbones* (and *Links*) to the profound transformations Somalia has undergone, particularly in the aftermath of failed dictatorship and the subsequent emergence of autonomous states. She highlights the allegorical representation of Mogadishu, a once-beautiful city, now depicted as a "chaotic city allegorically linked to hell" (Dodgson-Katiyo 2013, 80). Dodgson-Katiyo's work pertinently questions the fate of cosmopolitan characters like Jeebleh, Bile, and the younger generation represented by Malik and Ahl, whose return visits to Somalia, their supposed 'home,' become fraught with experiences of "death, destruction and disillusionment." This aligns closely with the present study's focus on the disillusionments of return migration. However, this paper will further expand on Dodgson-Katiyo's insights by also exploring the rare, albeit significant, moments of potential "joys" or unexpected positive outcomes that may also accompany return, even amidst prevailing chaos.

Finally, Nimo-ilhan Ali's observations on the motivations for migration within the Somali context provide a crucial socio-cultural background. Ali describes a phenomenon where the aspiration for social mobility is increasingly linked to outward migration and subsequent successful return. As Ali explains:

> This phenomenon is shaping young people's ideas of social mobility: to become successful in Somaliland one has to leave and return as a *qurbajoog* endowed with a Western education and passport. The quest to become a *qurbajoog* is why young people embark on *tahriib*—a dangerous journey to Europe via the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea (Ali 2016, 6).

This insight is particularly valuable as it underscores the pre-existing societal expectations and pressures that often accompany the decision to return, setting the stage for the potential disillusionment when these idealized expectations clash with the lived realities on the ground.

In summary, while existing scholarship has extensively explored themes of political instability, humanitarian crisis, and narrative experimentation in *Crossbones*, there remains a significant gap in the comprehensive analysis of the novel specifically through the lens of return migration and the disillusionment experienced by its characters. This study aims to bridge this gap, offering a focused literary analysis that contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex challenges faced by African returnees.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Migration is a fundamental and dynamic aspect of societal evolution, intrinsically linked to the ebb and flow of global progress and regression (Nail 2002, 236). The migrant, in this sense, is a product of shifting economic, environmental, and political landscapes that compel movement, positioning migration as both a historical constant and a contemporary global concern. Within the broader discourse of human mobility, the phenomenon of return migration holds particular significance, albeit often remaining an under-researched domain.

While return migration has existed for centuries, formal scholarly inquiry into its complexities largely gained traction in the 1980s, spurred by European countries' encouragement (both voluntary and forced) of migrant repatriation (Bovenkerk 1981; Gmelch 1980). A persistent challenge in this field, however, is the lack of standardized documentation and clear definitional consensus, which complicates systematic assessment of returnees' needs and the provision of effective reintegration support.

The precise definition of return migration remains a subject of ongoing academic debate. It encompasses a spectrum of scenarios, ranging from individuals working abroad who periodically visit their families before remigrating, to those who permanently repatriate following retirement (Shryock and Siegel 1973, 618). This definitional ambiguity contributes to challenges in statistical enumeration and the development of tailored reintegration policies. Despite these difficulties, pioneering scholarship by figures such as Frank Bovenkerk (1981) and George Gmelch (1980) has provided foundational insights into the adaptation and readjustment processes of returnees, often focusing on cases like return migration from the United States to Italy and its underlying motivations (Cerase 1974).

Recent scholarship on return migration emphasizes its nuanced and variegated nature. King and Christou (2011) characterize contemporary studies as exploring "a far more variegated and nuanced exploration of the ontology of return, stretching its meaning across time, space and generations and where the 'place' of return and the type of movement can have various expressions – real, virtual, imagined, desired, forced or denied" (King and Christou 2011, 453). Russell King (2000) famously described return migration as "the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration" (7), underscoring its historical neglect. Adele Galipo's (2013) work on skilled Somali returnees from Western Europe and North America illuminates the "complexities of migrant transnational experiences as situated in global political and economic processes" (1), suggesting that 'return,' in its multifaceted interpretations, is seldom permanent. Roger Brubaker (2005) further refines this understanding by proposing that diaspora be conceived not as a fixed entity, but as "an

idiom, a stance, a claim, as a category of practice… used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilise energies, to appeal to loyalties" (12). This conceptualization allows for a dynamic understanding of return that transcends mere physical relocation. Sophia Akhuemokhan (2020) further expands the scope of return to include "physical, mental, metaphorical, cultural or even biological" dimensions (125). For the purposes of this paper, the primary focus is on the physical return of migrants to their countries of origin.

Scholarly consensus suggests that the success of a return migrant's reintegration is significantly enhanced by voluntary return and meticulous preparation (Cassarino 2004, 10). Furthermore, success should not be narrowly defined by economic indicators alone. Nadler et al. (2018) argue that returnees who achieve emotional stability through familial reconnection or a renewed sense of belonging also attain significant success, as such feelings profoundly impact life satisfaction (370). While African migrants, particularly after retirement, often choose to return to their home countries, challenges arise when the original place of residence is no longer traceable, as is often the case in post-conflict zones where exiles return after prolonged periods (Ariwolo 2008, 62).

The "Myth of Return" and the Concept of "Home"

A recurring theme in migration studies is the "myth of return," which posits that regardless of how settled migrants become in their host countries, the dream of eventually returning to their homeland persists (Teo 2010, 806). Dustman and Weiss (2007) define return migration as the voluntary repatriation of migrants to their countries of origin after a substantial period abroad (258). This persistent longing for home is rooted in its conceptualization as a fundamental site of comfort, stability, and security—a "hearth and anchoring point" (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 11). Jennifer Ann Fawcett (2001) elaborates on this, describing home as a space for "representing acceptance of the true self, or an arena to express this, a secure environment to be sad or happy, a space of recognition from the others who belong in the home, a place to house the soul as well as the body" (2).

The idealized notion of return is often presented as a therapeutic journey toward self-fulfillment, where the returnee "rejoins the pieces of his life together" (Gage 2005, 14), or as a "homecoming to a home that is created through the act of return" (Kindinger 2016, 5). Gerhand Stilz (2007) defines 'home' as "the place of one's first orientation in the world, the central node on which 'our' personal identity has been nurtured, the place to which one 'belongs' and 'returns'" (9). However, this romanticized view often clashes with the reality of return. As Katie Vasey (2012) aptly observes, "there is no such thing as genuine uncomplicated return to one's home" (32). The decision to return remains a complex choice, regardless of the successes achieved or challenges faced in the host country.

Push, Pull, and Contextual Realities

Numerous factors influence the decision to return. John McLeod (2004) conceptualizes home as a place "where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves" (210), representing a significant pull factor. This sentiment echoes Helon Habila's protagonist in *Travellers*, who muses that "every departure is a death, every return a rebirth" (Habila 2019, 12)—a reflection on the traumatic discontents of migration and the hopeful anticipation of return. Baffour Takyi (2002) identifies several pull factors for African immigrants, including assurances of improved living conditions, job accessibility, educational prospects, and the likelihood of social development in home countries (237).

However, return migration is profoundly impacted by the prevailing conditions in the country of origin. The complex migratory and political history of Somalia, for instance, provides a critical context for this study. The collapse of Mogadishu's central government in 1991 precipitated acute humanitarian crises, leading to a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. The Somali refugee situation remains one of the world's most protracted, with over 1.1 million Somalis internally displaced and over 1 million registered as refugees in host countries (UNHCR 2024). This ongoing instability, particularly the insecurity in Southern and Central Somalia due to armed groups, significantly complicates return. While Somaliland, the self-declared Republic in the north-

west, has achieved comparative stability since 1991, this de facto political entity remains largely unrecognized by the international community, adding another layer of complexity to the return narrative.

This study specifically focuses on migrants who, having achieved success in the West, repatriate primarily in search of lost family connections and to reconnect with their homeland. Through an analysis of Farah's *Crossbones*, this paper will illuminate the multifaceted experiences of these African returnees in a troubled society, demonstrating how their return can be met with both dashed hopes and unexpected impediments, realities that are increasingly characteristic of modern migratory patterns.

Theoretical Approaches to Migration

Understanding the complexities of human mobility necessitates engaging with diverse theoretical perspectives on migration. As Douglas Massey et al. (1998) astutely observe, "At present, there is no single theory widely accepted by social scientists to account for the emergence and perpetuation of international migration throughout the world, only fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries" (17). This fragmentation underscores the need for more comprehensive theoretical models that can integrate varying viewpoints, degrees, and assumptions (Massey et al. 1998, 432).

While "Push-Pull" theories have gained popularity in explaining migration drivers, their explanatory power has been critiqued as superficial. Ronald Skeldon (1997), for instance, dismisses them as "but a platitude at best" (125-6), arguing that merely identifying reasons for migration fails to capture the intricate, multi-layered nature of the migratory process.

In response to the fragmented theoretical landscape, scholars like Hein De Haas (2007) advocate for conceptual eclecticism, proposing that bridging existing theoretical gaps requires incorporating new concepts and analytical tools. This approach acknowledges that a complete understanding of contemporary migration processes cannot be achieved by

relying on a singular disciplinary lens or a single level of analysis. As Massey et al. (1998) contend, "Rather, their complex, multifaceted nature requires a sophisticated theory that incorporates a variety of perspectives, levels, and assumptions" (432).

However, the notion of theoretical synthesis is not without its detractors. Oliver Bakewell (2010) cautions that the claim of "no inherent contradictions in the different theories is hard to sustain," particularly "when one considers very different ontological and epistemological foundations of migration theories" (1692). Drawing on Thomas Kuhn's (1970) work on paradigms, Bakewell's critique highlights that advocates of distinct theoretical paradigms often operate within different conceptual worlds, employing disparate terminologies and standards for validating problems and solutions. Each paradigm, therefore, tends to satisfy its own criteria while dismissing the problem definitions and assessment benchmarks of others (Kuhn 1970, 109).

Despite these valid critiques regarding the challenges of full theoretical integration, for the purpose of analyzing the literary representation of return migration and disillusionment in Farah's *Crossbones*, this study adopts a thematic and interdisciplinary approach informed by key concepts from various migration theories. Rather than seeking to apply a single, overarching theory, this paper will draw on insights from theories that address the socio-economic drivers of migration (push-pull), the complexities of 'home' and belonging (transnationalism, myth of return), and the challenges of reintegration (adaptation and readjustment processes). This eclectic approach allows for a robust exploration of the multifaceted experiences of Farah's characters, acknowledging that their disillusionment stems from a confluence of personal expectations, societal pressures, and the harsh realities of their politico-economic environment upon return. By foregrounding the literary portrayal of these experiences, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of return migration that complements sociological and economic analyses.

Negotiating Belonging and Lost Connections in *Crossbones*

Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* (2011) vividly portrays the complex motivations behind return migration, particularly the profound human desire for belonging, connection to ancestral roots, and the search for lost familial ties. The novel's central characters—Jeebleh, Malik, and Ahl—embody distinct facets of the returnee experience, each drawn back to Somalia despite having established comfortable lives and families in the West. Their repatriation is not merely a physical journey but a deeply symbolic one, a quest to physically engage with a homeland ravaged by the very issues—frustration, corruption, insecurity, terrorism, and religious insurgency—that paradoxically fuel their concern and desire for presence. This desire to be "physically present" (Farah 2011, 11) despite Somalia's volatility highlights the enduring pull of the homeland, even when idealized notions of return are challenged by stark realities.

The narrative of return in *Crossbones* commences with Jeebleh and his son-in-law, Malik, arriving in Mogadishu from Nairobi. Jeebleh, returning "for the first time in a decade," is accompanied by Malik, a New York-based freelance journalist "intending to write articles about the ancestral land he has never seen" (Farah 2011, 11). This immediate introduction of two distinct returnee profiles—the seasoned expatriate and the second-generation diasporan—sets the stage for exploring varied engagements with the concept of "home." Jeebleh's experience resonates with the disorienting familiarity described by the narrator-returnee in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*: "I am breathing the air of the city for the first time in a decade and a half, its white smoke and ocher dust which are as familiar as my own breath. But other things, less visible, have changed. I have taken into myself some of the assumptions of life in a Western democracy—certain ideas about legality, for instance, certain expectations of due process—and in that sense I have returned a stranger" (Cole 2011, 16-17). This sentiment of feeling simultaneously connected and alienated underscores the psychological complexities inherent in return, especially when the returnee has internalized new societal norms.

Malik's case further complicates the notion of return. Despite never having physically been to Somalia, he unequivocally views it as "home" because he has "no other home country

elsewhere" (Farah 2011, 73). His understanding is shaped by his family's history: "I know a lot about the country, because my grandparents and my father wished they could visit the country of their ancestors. In fact, my old man is living somewhere in the breakaway Republic of Somalia, tending to his camels…" (Farah 2011, 73). This illustrates the powerful concept of diasporic belonging and the myth of return (Teo 2010, 806), where the homeland functions as an imagined or inherited space of identity, even for those without direct lived experience. Malik's journey is thus a "return" not to a remembered past, but to a conceived ancestral land, an exploration of inherited identity.

The quest for familial connection serves as a potent pull factor for Ahl, Malik's elder brother, who also returns from the United States to search for his runaway stepson, Taxliil. Taxliil, reportedly recruited by an Imam in Minneapolis, is rumored to be involved with religious militants and pirates in Somalia. Ahl's journey is therefore driven by a desperate parental concern, a tangible manifestation of the "search for lost family" that anchors many return migration narratives. Similarly, Cambara, a native of Mogadishu who had resided in Toronto for years, makes the voluntary decision to return, driven by an enduring "love for her homeland" (Farah 2011, 14), despite the evident "chaos in the region." Her return signifies a deep-seated connection to a place of origin that transcends its contemporary instability. Fee-Jigan, another returnee from Cairo who had pursued various vocations abroad, epitomizes the professional impetus for return, seeking to contribute through his work as a stringer for Arabic wire services and an Al Jazeera reporter (Farah 2011, 186). These diverse motivations—familial obligation, journalistic pursuit, and inherent patriotic sentiment—collectively underscore the multi-faceted nature of the pull towards home, even when the homecoming itself promises significant challenges.

While *Crossbones* predominantly portrays the profound disillusionment of return migration, it also subtly sprinkles moments of respite and limited gains that illuminate the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring significance of relational bonds. These intermittent positive experiences suggest that even amidst pervasive chaos and tragedy, the concept of

"home" is not entirely devoid of solace or opportunity for personal fulfillment, however circumscribed.

A primary "gain" for Jeebleh and Malik manifests in the form of social capital and communal hospitality. Upon their arrival in Mogadishu, despite the pervasive insecurity, they are immediately enveloped by the warmth and steadfast support of Jeebleh's long-standing friend, Bile, and his partner, Cambara. This unconditional welcome, which sees the couple take on the responsibility of hosting the returnees (Farah 2011, 14), serves as a crucial emotional buffer against the harsh realities of their surroundings. Bile's willingness to offer his home provides a sense of belonging and familiarity, enabling Jeebleh and Malik to "feel more at home while they settle down to what brings them home" (Farah 2011, XX). This immediate access to a trusted social network underscores the importance of pre-existing relationships in mitigating the potentially overwhelming challenges of reintegration.

Beyond personal comfort, the novel hints at localized, albeit fragile, improvements in the sociopolitical landscape. Dajaal's observation of a "relative peace" in the city following the Islamic courts' wresting of power from warlords (Farah 2011, 20) suggests moments where local agency can bring about temporary stability. Although this peace is contingent on the establishment of a robust government and the provision of basic amenities, its momentary existence offers a glimpse of possibility. Furthermore, the returnees engage in purposeful activities. Jeebleh's overarching objective is to aid in the location of Taxliil, while Malik's journalistic pursuit—his keen interest "in writing about every aspect that touches on the lives of Somalis" (Farah 2011, 77)—provides him with a clear mission, transforming his return into a professional endeavor that connects him deeply with the local populace.

The most significant, albeit precarious, triumph occurs with Ahl's relentless search for his stepson, Taxliil. The brief reappearance of Saifullah, Xalan's runaway nephew, who testifies to knowing Taxliil from their shared experiences within the *Shabaab* ranks, instills a surge

of hope. This flicker of hope materializes when Taxliil himself surfaces, having failed to execute a suicide bombing mission. His reappearance, marked by ecstasy and profound relief for Ahl and the family, is accompanied by Taxliil's heartfelt apologies and admission of "foolhardy trust in the imam back in the Twin Cities, at whose prompting he volunteered to join up with Shabaab" (Farah 2011, 349). Ahl's initial mission is thus ostensibly accomplished: he finds his missing stepson.

However, this gain immediately transmutes into another daunting challenge: facilitating Taxliil's safe return to the United States (Farah 2011, 349). The subsequent perilous journey to Djibouti, aided by Malik and Jeebleh, demonstrates the collective resilience and resourcefulness of the returnees and their local allies. Despite their apprehension at the Djibouti airport where immigration authorities apprehend Ahl and Taxliil due to the latter's outburst, Jeebleh articulates a pragmatic sense of achievement: "I am convinced that they are in less of a hell than the one they would be in if they had fallen straight into the hands of Shabaab, the FBI, or Homeland Security in the U.S" (Farah 2011, 389). This stark comparison underscores that, for the returnees, "gains" are often relative, measured not by idealized aspirations but by the avoidance of more severe catastrophes. These moments, though sparse and often precarious, highlight the complex interplay of personal determination, communal support, and sheer fortune in navigating the turbulent landscape of return to a conflict-ridden homeland.

The experience of return migration in Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* is pervasively marked by a profound sense of disillusionment, a stark contrast between idealized expectations of homecoming and the brutal realities encountered in Somalia. This disillusionment is multifaceted, stemming from pervasive insecurity, systemic corruption, societal decay, and the psychological toll these conditions exact on the returnees. Far from a therapeutic return to self-fulfillment, the repatriation journey often devolves into a harrowing confrontation with the very forces that initially propelled outward migration.

From the moment of their arrival in Mogadishu, Jeebleh and Malik are confronted with an environment hostile to the idealized notion of home. The opening scene immediately establishes this disjuncture: "six bearded men wearing white robes with whips in their hands scream instructions at passengers and porters alike" (Farah 2011, 11), a grotesque image that shatters any illusions of a peaceful homecoming. This immediate harassment resonates with Jeebleh's wife Judith's lament about Somalia as "That unfortunate country, cursed with those dreadful clans people forever killing one another and everyone around them" (Farah 2011, 12). While Judith holds a "iota of hope" for change, the narrative swiftly demonstrates the tragic persistence of civil strife. The city's volatile atmosphere, where "crowds on the street are always in a hurry to gather in groups either for good or for worse," and where such gatherings "do not hesitate to turn into mobs at the slightest provocation" (Farah 2011, 17), signals a pervasive lack of social order and heightened danger.

The most visceral encounter with this insecurity occurs at the numerous checkpoints manned by armed militiamen. Despite identifying themselves as returnees, Jeebleh and Malik are subjected to an arbitrary and menacing search by "BigBeard" and his armed youths. The brazen demand for Malik's laptop, enforced by the chilling readiness to "shoot, if provoked or ordered by BigBeard to do so" (Farah 2011, 21), constitutes a profound violation. This experience, unprecedented in their Western lives, leaves them "stunned" and highlights the complete absence of due process or personal security. The scene directly parallels the experience of the protagonist in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, who faces immediate demands for bribes at customs (Ndibe 2014, 74), underscoring a wider pattern of official and unofficial extortion experienced by returnees to postcolonial African states. Jeebleh's internal lament, "There is no hurt worse than the hurt you cannot fully describe" (Farah 2011, 25), powerfully encapsulates the psychological shock and incomprehension of encountering such brazen lawlessness in a place once revered as the "pearl of the Indian Ocean."

The persistent threat is not merely external but internal, as demonstrated by the casual conversation between Jeebleh and Dajaal, who warns, "How well can you know anyone these days?" (Farah 2011, 17), hinting at pervasive mistrust and suspicion even among long-standing acquaintances. The necessity for heightened vigilance is underscored by Jeebleh's meticulous "securing the place" and his admonition to Malik that "Mogadishu is a very dangerous place, but you can make it less so. Please keep that in mind" (Farah 2011, 30). This constant state of alert forces returnees to adopt a survivalist mentality, fundamentally altering their sense of comfort and freedom.

Beyond overt threats, the returnees confront pervasive corruption and economic stagnation, which further erode their hopes for Somalia's recovery. The underdevelopment of Mogadishu, despite collected taxes, is a glaring manifestation of this corruption, revealing a "heartlessness, the mindlessness of a community failing its responsibility toward itself; a feebleness of purpose; an inadequacy" (Farah 2011, 95). Ahl's experience in Bosaso further exemplifies this systemic rot. Despite paying "exorbitantly" for his hotel room, he finds neither hospitality nor privacy, indicative of a service sector crippled by unprofessionalism and a culture of impunity. His observation that "People out here are a nervy lot, quick to anger and to reach for their guns" (Farah 2011, 100) highlights how economic grievances intertwine with widespread violence, creating a volatile environment where basic rights are disregarded.

The lack of economic opportunity is further underscored by the high rate of unemployment and the entrenched irresponsibility even among those who are employed. Bile's lament about a domestic staff member who defies dismissal, protected by armed youths who "will turn up to waste you in less time than it takes to stub out a cigarette" (Farah 2011, 120), exposes the breakdown of formal labor relations and the prevalence of a protection racket economy. The shocking admission by Ma-Gabadeh, a pirate and capitalist, that he, "like many others, contributed to the creation of the crisis and then profited from the turmoil" and enjoys being "unfettered by tax laws" (Farah 2011, 188), reveals a cynical ecosystem where powerful individuals deliberately perpetuate instability for financial gain. This

active sabotage of peace and economic development is a profound source of disillusionment for returnees who had hoped to contribute to a better future. The deplorable poverty, exacerbated by illegal fishing vessels that deprive locals of their traditional food source despite Somalia's extensive coastline (Farah 2011, 188), further cements the sense of a society regressing rather than progressing.

The societal fabric itself appears to be unraveling, contributing significantly to the returnees' disillusionment. The civil war has shattered familial cohesion, disrupting traditional practices where families once gathered to welcome visitors. Xalan's observation that families, "loyal as they are to each other, they no longer form a family unit" (Farah 2011, 146), speaks to the profound social fragmentation. The widespread use of *qaat* by men like Warsame, who seek solace from the city's instability, highlights a coping mechanism that Xalan condemns as a "master disrupter of family normalcy, a costly demolisher of the social fabric" (Farah 2011, 149). This cultural decline underscores the depth of the crisis beyond mere physical violence.

The constant threat to journalists, exemplified by Cambara's warning to Malik that they "are under constant threat" from "fifth columnists" (Farah 2011, 78), and the shocking assassination of Dajaal for merely expressing his opinion (Farah 2011, 242), demonstrates the severe suppression of free speech and intellectual engagement. Malik's anguish over Dajaal's death, coupled with his realization that there is "no sanctity of human life" (Farah 2011, 251), plunges him into severe despondency, challenging his very sense of personal safety and the value of human existence in Somalia. The sight of youths "stamping on a corpse in uniform" (Farah 2011, 332) leads Malik to a chilling conclusion: Somalis seem detached from universal human values, alienating him from his perceived kin and shattering any lingering romantic notions about his homeland.

Ahl's experiences further underscore the psychological toll. His constant vigilance against hotel staff invading his privacy, followed by an "outrageous bill" he dares not dispute for fear of being "made to pay at gunpoint, possibly with his life" (Farah 2011, 275), highlights

the systemic exploitation and powerlessness faced by returnees with perceived foreign wealth. The tragic suicide bombing by Saifullah, a former missing nephew, after visiting his family demonstrates the insidious reach of radicalization, transforming "amiable, innocent, caring and agreeable" youths into "plaintive, fearful" individuals (Farah 2011, 351). This pervasive brainwashing, which targets "teenagers from broken homes or young boys and girls to whom they can provide a safety net" (Farah 2011, 130), is a devastating betrayal of the younger generation and a profound source of despair for the returnees. The novel also portrays the regression of women's societal roles. Kala-Saar laments, "Times were when Somali women were better organized—as members of political movements, as beacons of the nation. Not anymore" (Farah 2011, 318), pointing to the oppressive dictates of the ruling religious courts that suppress women's public contributions. This curtailment of fundamental freedoms adds another layer to the pervading disillusionment regarding Somalia's future.

Malik's narrow escape from an improvised roadside device that kills his local companion, Qasiir, and his subsequent hospitalization, serve as a culmination of his disillusionment. The realization that "roadside bombing is now the insurgents' most preferred mode of operation" (Farah 2011, 337) and the daily targeting of journalists confirm the extreme danger inherent in his professional pursuit. Advised to "leave quickly, quit this accursed country while you can" (Farah 2011, 344), Malik's initial journalistic mission transforms into a desperate struggle for survival. His departure is inevitable, a direct consequence of the irreconcilable gap between his hopes and Somalia's harsh realities.

The disillusionment experienced by Farah's characters resonates with narratives of failed return in other African literatures. In Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994), for example, the protagonist's celebratory return to Nigeria after a long stay in London is shattered by her husband's deception and the discovery of a second wife. Kehinde's idealized vision of "Madam Been-To" status is crushed, leading to her solitary return to the UK (Emecheta 1994, 150). This intertextual parallel highlight that disillusionment is not solely a product

of specific conflict zones like Somalia but can arise from cultural clashes and betrayed personal expectations, underscoring the universal fragility of idealized homecomings.

Conclusion

This article has re-evaluated the complexities of return migration among African subjects, particularly those who, despite achieving a degree of success and integration in Western contexts, experience profound disillusionment upon returning to their ancestral homelands. Diverging from conventional scholarship that often frames return migration as a failure to thrive in the West, this paper, through a re-reading of Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones*, foregrounds the multifaceted challenges encountered by returnees. These challenges include, but are not limited to, socio-cultural reintegration deficits, economic precarity, persistent insurgency and terrorism, governance deficiencies, systemic corruption, and overwhelming societal pressures.

The analysis demonstrates that the recurrence and exacerbation of these antecedent conditions, which often served as initial impetuses for migration, lead to a profound re-evaluation of the decision to return. By employing a thematic and interdisciplinary approach informed by various migration theories, the article elucidates how Farah's characters, Jeebleh, Malik, Ahl, Cambara, and Fee-Jigan embody these complex experiences. Their journeys are not simply physical returns but deeply symbolic quests for belonging and lost connections, often culminating in dashed hopes.

While the overwhelming narrative in *Crossbones* is one of disillusionment, the article also identified subtle yet significant moments of resilience and limited gains. The communal hospitality extended by characters like Bile and Cambara, the brief periods of localized peace, and the purposeful engagements of the returnees (such as Malik's journalism and Ahl's relentless search for Taxliil) highlight the enduring significance of social capital and the human spirit's capacity for adaptation even amidst chaos. The precarious triumph of Taxliil's reappearance, though temporary, underscores that the concept of 'home' is not entirely devoid of solace or opportunity for personal fulfillment, however circumscribed.

This paper contributes significantly to the burgeoning field of return migration studies by offering a focused literary analysis that complements sociological and economic perspectives. It underscores the critical need for a deeper understanding of the African returnee experience, a subject whose complexities remain largely unexplored within both local and global scholarly discourse. Future research could further explore the long-term psychological impacts of this disillusionment on returnees and investigate potential policy interventions that could better support successful reintegration.

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