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Musumba, Obala F. 2023. 'Emergents' of Violence: Nuruddin Farah's Representation of the Child in Conflict Zones. LuKA - Studien zu Literaturen und Kunst Afrikas 16. Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 200 Pages. ISBN: 978-3-86821-975-3

Reviewed by

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In *'Emergents' of Violence*, published 2023 by WVT, Obala F. Musumba explores the complex representation of the child and of childhood in Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy. In his monograph, Musumba focuses on three main areas of research: the forms and functions of child characters amidst violent conflict, specifically, civil war; the legacy of colonial violence and its effects on the child characters in the postcolonial state in Farah's fiction; and Farah's social vision for Somali society through the fictionalisation of the child.

Obala F. Musumba, identifies the research gap in the lack of attention given to the child characters in Farah's fiction and attempts to remedy this with his monograph. In his analysis, the author not only looks at representations of the child in conflict zones (e.g., as child soldier), but also at the children of the Somali diaspora returning to post-civil war Somalia. Employing a postcolonial theoretical lens, the author examines how childhood or the child character is fictionalised in the context of civil war in postcolonial African states taking the example of Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy.

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The three books of the trilogy, *Links* (2003), *Knots* (2007), and *Crossbones* (2011), are largely set in Mogadishu (the author spells it Mogadiscio) during the period of the civil war that erupted after the fall of General Siyad Barre in 1991. The author aims to show "how Farah strives to reconstruct the identity of these child characters" (2). Musumba's analysis rests on three central claims: first, that Farah employs child characters to question the construction of "littoral frontiers of peace" (2) within zones of violence; second, that postcolonial violence reconfigures the identities of the child figures; and third, that the fictionalisation of the child articulates Farah's social vision for Somali society.

The monograph is divided into three parts, spanning nine chapters. Part One, "Theoretical and Contextual Preliminaries" (Chapter 1-3), discusses the construction of childhood in the Somali socio-political context, establishes the book's theoretical framework, and delineates biographical aspects of Farah as writer. Part Two, (Chapter 4-7), investigates the forms and functions of the child in conflict zones as well as ambivalences and ambiguities of childhood in the selected texts. Part Three, (Chapter 8-9), moves beyond Farah's work and offers a comparative reading of the representation of children in diasporic Somali and Eastern African literature, which is followed by the conclusion.

In his introduction, Musumba further elucidates his focus on (the fictionalisation of) childhood amidst violent conflicts, by which he means "conflicts that involve mass loss of lives, maiming, rape, mass dislocation of people, looting, and mass destruction of property among other forms of atrocities associated with situations of war" (1). In his analysis of the representation of the child amidst conflict zones in the selected novels by Farah, Musumba attempts to "draw a connection between violence, art, and childhood" (1), as he articulates. The author posits this as crucial in the understanding of the "cause and course of the violence" (1), the root of which the author detects in colonial violence. Musumba further points out that his focus lies on the concept of the child and discourses on childhood in the Somali context. Musumba's aim is to go beyond the figure of the child soldier and to discuss the child character in regard to identity, migration, and social vision. Importantly, Musumba underscores that Farah's work is not children's literature and that his child characters — while not protagonists — play pivotal narrative and symbolic roles. He also argues for an expanded notion of childhood, suggesting that it extends into adulthood in Farah's adult characters, complicating traditional age-based definitions.

Musumba's argument that "the reader tends to see 'a child' even in adult characters" (2) in Farah's novels is somewhat problematic as it runs the risk of echoing colonial discourses that infantilise adult Africans and deny them full

agency and sovereignty. However, as Musumba explains, "in the African concept of childhood [...] a child is not necessarily or exclusively defined by age but, in many instances, in relation to a given person or context" (80). Hence, Musumba argues, even an adult character like Jeebleh in Farah's *Links* can be regarded as child figure when the focus is on his relationship with his late mother. Musumba contends that many of Farah's characters grapple with overlapping crises of identity, inhabiting spaces of multiplicity (as individual and national identities) and navigating liminalities such as between childhood and adulthood, clan and nation, or hope and despair.

In particular Chapters Four, Five, and Six offer enlightening discussions on the construction and role of the child in Farah's fiction. In Chapter Four, Musumba focuses on the child figure itself, delineating how the notion of the innocence of the child is complicated and rendered elusive by violent conflicts and how the child's agency is restored (cf. 4). In his analysis, Musumba distinguishes between the child that is shielded from war (perhaps in a fabricated reality) and the child actively involved in war, that is, as victim to atrocities, as perpetrator in war (i.e., as child soldier), or as both. Drawing on Achille Mbembe, Musumba convincingly addresses this ambivalence of victim turning culprit in violent militias as well as sheltered children living in a temporary state of peace and protection amidst the normality of war and sets it in the context of the chaos of the postcolony in which multiple realities co-exist. In his discussion, Musumba makes the argument that in Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy the home or house as spaces are crucial symbols representing innocence and safety for the child. However, interestingly he interjects that Farah favours a Westernised notion of home while refraining from depicting 'traditional' Somali family settings (nomadic, patriarchic, several children). For Musumba this choice results in the "overall effect [...] that the African idea of home is lost in this westernised concept" (89).

Chapter Five to Chapter Seven draw on this first analytical chapter. Yet Chapter Five adds another interesting aspect to the discussion, that is movement, in particular in the form of flight (migration). Musumba discusses this aspect as "emergent precocity" by which he understands the "conditions that force the child figure to lead an adult life" (95), that is, the child leaving home and joining military forces, voluntarily yet also as the only means of survival. In his discussion of flight, Musumba addresses Islamic metaphysical worldviews, in particular regarding heroism, martyrdom, and death as form of flight.

Chapter Six further delves into the ambivalences and ambiguities in the representation of the child figure in violent conflict zones in Farah's fiction. In his

discussion of childhood, Musumba makes the claim that the socio-political construction of childhood in Somalia is itself an in-between, syncretic construct, arguing that "the concept of childhood is a product of hybridisation of African cultural precepts and European influence rendered through Western education and other Western cultural media" (87). According to Musumba, not only the concept of childhood is one of hybridity, but also the identity of the child itself appears to be split (or rather hybrid) in Farah's fiction. Looking at the conditions of a collapsed Mogadishu, Musumba describes the state of the child characters as one that is hybridised, in-between childhood and adulthood. In Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy, Musumba argues that "[a]part from the chronological age of the child character [...], the distinction between a child and an adult is almost impossible" (115). As Farah's literary work shows, in zones of violent conflict, children are not only taking on occasional adult tasks and duties, but are often filling the lacunae left by absent adults, hence inhabiting adult roles and responsibilities (entering the labour market, protecting the community, serving in militias). Musumba therefore claims that the child character becomes the central figure in the confusion of war and that in the course of Farah's work, the child character assumes an increasingly important role.

In Chapter Seven, the author looks at the narration of war and explores in what way Farah's social vision for Somali society is expressed through the child figures in his fiction. Musumba makes the argument that even though Farah's protagonists are diasporic adults who return to Somalia after years abroad, it is the child character that drives the plot and makes visible Farah's political views, such as his commitment to pan-Africanism or his critique of global capitalism in the *Past Imperfect* trilogy.

In conclusion, Musumba's detailed analysis of the child in war, in particular the Somali civil war, in Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy offers a nuanced view at the construction and representation of the child in conflict zones, delineating the ambiguities and complexities of a childhood amidst the chaos of an emerging postcolonial state and the lasting legacies of colonial violence and trauma.