

TACTILE DEMOGRAPHICS IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S *CROSSBONES*

Isaac M. Udoh¹

Abstract

This study explored the intersection of violence and identity in territorial conflicts using Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* as reference. Through the concepts of tactile demographics, Necropolitanism and Panopticon, the study reveals the way in which bodies are marked, controlled and politicized in a carceral state. An analysis of the novel shows how individuals and communities are mapped during war, piracy, and insurgency. The surveillance, displacement, and bodily vulnerability which the novel exposes reveals how powerful/dictators, necropowers, manipulate movement, touch and space to enforce political and social division. Farah through these pictures emphasizes the consequences of wars, some of which include individual bodies becoming the sites of torture, violence and resistance.

Keywords: Tactile Demographics, Somalia, Necropower, Panopticon, Carceral, War.

¹Isaac M. Udoh, Ph.D is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Literature, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria. isaac.udoh@abiastateuniversity.edu.ng. 08037953960

Introduction

We experience the world around us even as our experience of that world is determined and affected by many factors. There are shades, hues, depths, dimensions in the world. The world is peaceful. It is at war. People are happy. People are sad. The world is beautiful and sometimes it is ugly. In many parts of the world it is a combination of some or all of the above at once. Even within one there is duality; one may be happy and sad at the same time. One may be ugly and beautiful at the same time. One may even be at peace and at war at once. It is fluid and constantly evolving.

Eaglewoman, a character in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* thinks "that there is no perfectly happy or contented human being in the whole world... what human beings are doing is just trying to be happy, to pluck joy from life's tree of thorns. Happiness is a rose surrounded by the thorn on a rose bush "(129). Nothing seems to be decidedly permanent; life itself decries permanence. Everything will change, ultimately.

The world is intractable; one cannot pin it down. It is fluid and constantly evolving. A breath of laughter can lapse into tears, as peace can become war. Life is always being contested. Wars erupt sometimes for the most absurd reasons, and sometimes for complex and germane reasons. Many reasons have been given for why wars happen; raw materials, religion, territories, supremacy, women (the elopement of Helen, the Queen of Sparta, with Paris is believed to have triggered one of the longest wars in history, the Trojan War), exploration, etc. Sometimes nations go to war if the profit will be bigger than the loss. To show 'relevant' wars are there are international laws governing their conduct. Within the constitutions of most nations, articles exist that determine the conditions that could lead to war, the rules of engagement, and who can declare war.

There is also the 'just war'. The concept of the just war is enshrined in human nature and stipulates that the reasons for war should be seen as just, and warring parties should be able to show just cause for a war. This concept, though steeped in human DNA from ancient times, can be traced to the writings of St. Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, who tried to justify and rationalize war with Christian Ideology:

To Aquinas, a war must be just in both the reasons for going to war and how war is fought. Reasons for going to war... are (1) war is declared by an appropriate authority; (2) the war is waged for just cause; (3) the war is waged for just intentions... (4) there must be a reasonable chance of success; (5) the good that will be achieved must outweigh the bad; and (6) war must be a last resort. (National Geographic).

Beyond national laws on the conduct of war, there are international treaties/conventions that govern the declaration and conduct of war. The Geneva Convention, also known as *Humanitarian Law of Armed Conflicts* is ratified by 194 states, thus making it universally applicable. The Geneva Convention in its various conventions (i-iv), protocols (i-iii) and articles, provide for the way wars should be prosecuted and the way soldiers and civilians should be treated. Because the convention is ratified by 194 states. It has universal jurisdiction and applicability (Legal Information Institute, Cornell Univ.).

Wars are one of the most exhaustively destructive forces in the world; natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, wildfire, etc. are perhaps the only more destructive forces than wars. These are natural disasters. Humanity has no control over them. Wars are man-made and sometimes avoidable. But they happen, in spite of the fact that one of humanity's most evocative prayers is the prayer for a good and peaceful life; every facet of human society - social, cultural, political, economic, religion, etc. - is geared towards ensuring that we access a good life. However, and sadly, bad things happen. Horrific ordeals, great tragedies, natural calamities, etc., evoke and impose distress, severe injury and stress, which we are constrained to respond to in one way or the other. Again, wars are more traumatic experiences than all of them.

Many victims of war are overawed by its rapacious prodigality and are left swooning in hurtful and deep memories that it is all they can do to remain sane; the deaths, maiming, dislocations, become a part of the screaming memory whose very existence hobble their essential humanity, cripple their appreciation of reality and reduce or completely erase any tactile pleasure life could offer them. One of the most potent aspects of our humanity is being in touch with our reality, a reality that speaks to and accommodates the entirety of our experiences. A reality that one is familiar with, and which soothes rather than disquiet. When these realities are tampered with, suspended, or upended, a disquieting reality sets in with tragic impulses.

Wars are tragic. Wars disrobe our familiarity with experience; our physical environment change, our relationships change and the psychology of human relationship evolve degradingly. The tragedy of wars is not so much about death, it is also about loss of familiar scapes – human, environment, relational - and the abnegation and suspension of familiar relationships. It awakens brutality, disenfranchises egalitarianism, emphasizes vulnerability, deepens violence and displaces the known. During wars familiar land and mind scapes become contested spaces where bodies are marked, controlled and resisted. There is loss of agency as individuals become sucked into a spiraling vortex of violence and seek to navigate the vertiginous labyrinth of survival in a carceral space. Here, individuals have diminished or no control over circumstances of their lives as they become incarcerated within the complex of a machinery that destroys and consumes every good work. Wars are rapacious and insidious. The individuals who experience wars are not passive observers nor are they quiescent participants; the loss of agency shunts them into a passivity that is at once tragic and traumatic, while also revealing a dark side to their personality that had lain dormant all the while.

How does demographics determine one's safety at a time of war? Does one's age, gender, education, ethnicity and sex determine whether one is safe or not in war? How does war affect our physical interactions, bodily experiences and sensory perceptions? And, how do these configure identity, community, and power dynamics in a space that is contested? Nuruddin Farah in several of his novels portrays what wars do to a nation, especially his native Somalia, and to a people, revealing that wars create chaos, state collapse and nercropolitical territories where nationals and internationals contest for the body and soul of a people.

Africa has fought several wars. Some have ended and some are still ongoing. There have been political conflicts, civil unrests, resource-based conflicts, terrorism-based conflicts, identity-based conflicts and many more. Some of these wars include the Nigeria Civil War (1967-1970), the Eritrean – Ethiopian war (1998-2000), the Somali civil war, (1991-present) the Rwandan Genocide, (1994) the Great War of Africa (the Second Congo War) (1998-2003) the Boko Haram war, etc. Factors like political instability, ethnic and religious tensions, resource control, external interference, and economic factors fuel wars in Africa. The 'profit' of wars usually include loss of life, displacement, social, economic, and political disruptions, etc. Elechi Amadi, trying to understand the basis of wars, questions, "But just what is it that sustains our love of life and drives us to fight and kill one another for supremacy, making the history of the world one long drama of conflict? (83) Humans seem to relish wars but suffer the consequences of war with constipated tragedy.

Conceptual Framework

Michael Foucault discusses the concepts of Panopticism (Semple 116-117), surveillance, Discipline and Punishment in a failed state, biopolitics and the control of populations, resistance and counter-conduct, and observes that power structures impose epistemic violence on corporeal agencies and thereby invalidate, silence and marginalize groups of people; within the confines of power structures systems that do not align are invalidated and or erased.

Foucault assays that society incorporates a panopticon prison design" where every member of the social system is watched and is being watched, a big-brother-like constant surveillance is upheld, "he is seen, but he does not see..." (201) and the abnormal (the "delinquent) enforce conformity, and punishment is the goal rather than rehabilitation; punishment gradually becomes the most hidden part of the penal process (9); "the prison is like a disciplined barracks, a strict school (293). For Foucault, therefore, freedom in modern society is an illusion because every institution is primed to serve as control post; modern freedom is a sentiment and not a reality. The institutions instituted to aid and enhance freedom engender a carceral space. Within that carceral space prisons, schools, hospitals and other institutions uphold and exacerbate sovereign power by brute force, constant surveillance, disciplinary techniques, hierarchical observations, etc. in order to produce "docile bodies" (10), people who are constrained to obey.

Achille Mbembe asserts 'necropolitics', the politics that dishes death and the power to determine who dies and who lives, as the sovereign's autocratic power that sits over life and death and sees social populations as disposable. Government is seen as demonstrably immune from accountability. Sovereign politics exposes that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die (66). According to Mbembe, "Necropolitics is the contemporary form of subjugating life to the power of death" (92). Thus, power, especially sovereign power, exists to manage death: "The exercise of sovereign power amounts to a right to kill or to let live (34). Every political leader, at the assumption of power, takes an oath, the basis of which is to safeguard the lives and properties of the generality of the people. Great resources and personnel are expended to make sure this happens. Essentially then, we can say that government and governance is pro-life. But when this does not happen government and governance become a bed of tragic vituperations; when states lose or cede their natural powers and non-state actors begin to act a scourge of epic proportions take place.

Thus, therefore, between Foucault and Mbembe, what is apparent is the state's overarching power, which Foucault couches as "the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). This visibility imperils the agency of the individual while opening them up for tragic exploitation by the powers of state, which state has "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not "(Mbembe 27). The individual is a body without agency, especially when body is "... the place where the vengeance of the sovereign is applied, the anchoring point for a manifestation of power" (Foucault 55). In wars individual liberty and safety are suspended power, whether state or non-state, is exercised to the disadvantage of many.

In *Crossbones* Farah pictures a fractured society that is a haven for pirates, guerilla fighters, warlords, sovereign powers of all hues, and common citizens who attempt to navigate the incendiary warscape that is Somalia. In a multi-person narrative of extremism, war, breach of sovereignty, chaos and political instability, *Crossbones* follows a returnee Somali's (Jeebleh) return to his country from USA and his attempt, in concert with Malik, his son-in-law (a journalist), Ahl, Malik's brother, to search for Taxliil, his stepson.

The novel pictures them in contact which other characters who seek a purchase on a fleeting and fleeing aperture of their humanity in the face of varying degrees of loss, displacement, violence and abject tragedies. These characters each hold on to a measure of the human cost of war, extremism, radicalization, piracy, exploitation, issues of identity, externalization and Westernization of internal conflict and their consequences.

A narrative that mirrors the fragmentary and chaotic nature of the subject society, *Crossbones* captures the brutal beauty of a nation and a people who are diverse, rich, tragic, traumatized, and whose deeply nuanced and eclectic history is the story of transitions and the

brutish weight of those transitions on the people. Our first intimation of the brutal nature of Mogadishu is when Jeebleh remembers his wife's usual refrain about Somalia as they drive from the airport towards Mogadishu, "That unfortunate country, cursed with those dreadful clans people, forever killing one another and everyone around them" (17). As they edge closer into Mogadishu they are accosted by volunteers and armed guards of the Union of Islamic Courts:

At Bigbeard's command, four armed youths emerge out of a cubicle to the right of where the group is standing. The youths fan out, each in a dramatic way, as if they are mimicking a movie they have seen or some jihadi documentary they have been shown. They raise their gas-operated Ak-47s and, standing with their feet apart, push the selector switches to automatic: they are ready to shoot, if provoked or ordered by BigBeard to do so (24)

In another instance, in a different location, in a "consecrated" house (16), YoungThing is ordered to kill an old man: "YoungThing shoots, using the silencer. As the bullet strikes Dhoorre in the forehead, YoungThing is certain that he hears a seabird cawing, only he cannot interpret what it is saying, or whether it is foretelling his own imminent death. Dhoorre falls off his chair, dropping to the floor in an uncoordinated heap of self-reproach..." (57). Again, in the same scene as above, "TruthTeller closes his eyes, winces like a child taking bitter medicine, and shoots YoungThing right between the eyes. Then he unscrews the silencer from the gun." (58)

Between the incident at the checkpoint, the killing of Dhoorre and YoungThing, between the frisking of Malik and his companions, the search and deleting of items in the computer, the locking of the old man in the bathroom and the disposal of the dead bodies of both Dhoorre and YoungThing, we see actors, both state and pseudo-state, reducing individuals to "docile bodies" (Foucault 135). Bodies mined of any sense of agency, reduced to just figures whose grotesque death postures are typical and common. These lives are shaped and controlled by the panoptic regimen of government; servile, regulated, disciplined, and violated in all possible ways by all apparatus of government, and walking in a fugue.

The guns at both the checkpoint and the 'consecrated' house show the state's (including the non-state actors) tactile control on the messes of the people. The gun pointed at Dhoorre and Malik and his companions dictate, not only movement, but the direction of movement. The individuals at the south end of the gun have their agency subsumed within the commanding menace of the gun; the gun bearers exercise their power through the right to kill (Mbembe 12) thus they effect tactile domination. The checkpoint and the consecrated safe house, operate as a Foucaultian heterotopia, on 'other' space existing to contradict a safe and usual space, and a space where the human body is specimen for the assertion of dominance and control. The victims are aware of the non-value of their lives and thus are at once scared and cynical in the face of death. The muzzle of a gun and even the appearance of a gun can dictate the direction an individual should take.

In a conversation between Jeebleh and an old man after a mine detonates, killing many young people Jeebleh asks:

“Why have you been spared?” Jeebleh asks

“Because I recruit the martyrs”, the man says,

“You recruit them, they die, and you live on?”

“I blood the young brood of martyrs, suicides” (126)

Jeebleh challenges the old man’s assertion that, “it is the martyrs’ blood that helps keep the nation alive. Without that, there will be no country”, by asking “has it ever occurred to you to give the young the choice whether to live on or to die for a religious cause in which they may not believe?” (126) The martyrs have had their agencies erased by indoctrination and extremism and can therefore kill themselves and others without blinking.

Essentially, the soldiers, clansmen, guerrillas, and pirates effect a tactile domination that eventuate loss of agency and devaluation of humanity, “from his posture alone, you can’t tell if the old man is dead. He lies on his back, head to one side, eyes not wholly closed, his position suggesting sleep” (57). YoungThing “walks over to where the old man lies sprawled, his legs splayed, his neck crooked, his hands spread out by his side, his nakedness embarrassing...” (57). This posture of Dhoorre is emblematic of the condition of the common man at that time in Somalia; they are ‘sprawled’, ‘splayed’, with necks made ‘crooked’, with hands ‘spread out’, and ‘embarrassed’. They are pummeled into all shapes, much like the potter shaping clay in order to produce something worthwhile. But in this case what is produced is different shapes of death. Every hope, every fear, every desire Dhoorre had had is reduced to a posture of death!

BigBeard and his cohorts are carriers of pain and hopelessness; they weaponize, articulate and eventuate pain in all possible shades – physical, psychologically, spiritually, etc. Their contumely is oppressive and dark and imposes a haunting trauma on the psyche of people. They are the dogs of war whose bark and bite is loud and erase any form of agency the people may have had. They echo what Nathan Nkala observes in *Drums and the Voice of Death*:

Terrible things were.... happen(ing) to the elephant of a country. It was as if some superman had tripped the elephant flat on its side... creatures were scurrying all over its hulk, wielding axes and machets, spears and arrows. Sizeable chunks of its meet were already sizzling in small fires all over the land (22)

Somalia, the elephant, is already on its side, at once somnolent and comatose, with choice pieces of its flesh already the exclusive preserve of multiple necropowers, warlords, clan heads, foreign powers, Al-shabaab, etc, whose very reason for the war is as diverse as they are many.

For Somalis of every cast and die, the social upheaval in the land is as a result of diverse factors. Firstly, pirates, see themselves as insurgents against foreign exploitation, “They stole our fish, so we take their ships” (*Crossbones* 180); “They stole, our fish, poisoned our waters, then sent their warships to punish us for resisting” (182) “the pirates are criminals, yes... but who made the ocean a warzone first?” (184). “we are criminals only because the world criminalized us first” (182). For the pirates the sea is both the site of their trauma and of rebellion; their economic life-blood is being drained leaving them in abject poverty and they are rebelling against colonial theft, “we are all pirates of memory, stealing from our past” (12), by plundering foreign ships and commerce, thus becoming a violent resistance to global predation on a battleground for sovereignty.

For the pirates, the only solution to this problem is an attack on the business interests of competing sovereignties who turn Somalia into a necropolitical territory where only their commercial interest is paramount, “we steal back what was stolen first” (182)

Secondly, the diasporic intellectual is faced with a dilemma, should I get involved? How far can I be involved? Malik is a journalist, a native of Somalia but based abroad. He is ambivalent and at once detached and involved in the evolution of a contingent Somalia. There is no split path for him where he is allowed to choose a direction; all the paths are merged and, even though he confessed the way he feels, “my journalism feels like betrayal”, he internalizes the suffering that his passport as an expat protects him from, “I document suffering my passport protects me from” “...my passport protects me; my people have no such armor” (65), and this is what makes it tragic; he cannot even own the suffering because his passport protects him from expressing and personalizing the full panoply of Somalia’s tragedy. His journalism is complicit in Somalia’s tragic narrative as he profits from it.

Thirdly, a new social contract has replaced any peacetime constitution that may have existed. Terror. Violence is the new order. Everywhere, on every street, in the creeks, at check points, terror is naked and violence is law. The law is the visible muzzle of a rifle or the invisible threat of violence. Yusuf observes that, “in Mogadishu, the law is a bullet (134) and “Al-Shaba ad’s Courts punish faster than God’s judgment (113). A young man is accused of spying and is executed by militants, “The boy’s knees buckled as the masked fighter raised the pistol. A single shot, and the crowd gasped – not in horror, but in a strange, collective release” (45). A boy is conscripted by a militant group, “the boy’s mother wailed, clutching at his short, but the fighter shoved her aside. ‘He belongs to the jihad now” (176)

These incidents highlight the breakdown of law and order while underscoring lawlessness, foreign interference (necropowers), resistance, and religious extremism; whoever holds any part of the elephant, therefore, can only keep it through terror and with the knowledge that lives are disposable thrown in to heighten the terror; whether a child dies during a bombing or a journalist is executed in the public square, what is important is that the message is explicit: terror is everywhere.

Fourthly, interventions, especially foreign interventions, in wars are usually to intervene to stop fighting, but in the case of Somalia there is a necropolitical Irony that sees interventionist forces becoming vested interest in the conflicts. All the intervention forces, international sovereignties, including humanitarian agencies, perpetuate imperialism and violence; “UN trucks bring food and bullets” (158); “the Ethiopians came in with American guns and Arab silence. They called it liberation’, but all they brought was ruin” (62), “their tanks rolled over our streets like they owned them – and behind them, the Americans, whispering orders” (64); they “came to save us by killing us” (67); “The UN fed us with one hand and armed our killers with the other” (212), “their white trucks brought rice and bandages, but never justice” (214); every militia had a foreign patron – America, Ethiopia, Eritrea – each playing chess with Somali lives “(252).

What is obvious is that interventionist activities are not necessarily in the country to stop conflicts; they are not there because they feel any sense of sympathy for the nation in conflict. More often than not, it is as cover for military actions fronted as help but which covertly deepens and escalates the violence, it provides platform for world powers to test and calibrate their new technologies and military platforms. If their interventions were genuine and ultimately effective why is the picture of Somalia we see so destitute? Why do the people feel so blest with decrepitude, angst, chaos, loss, and immense tragedies? Jeebleh’s thoughts as he assesses the aftermath of a war situates the proportion of the tragedy:

Jeebleh has the feeling that he is not in a city but in a village
somewhere in the hinterland. But he is not sure; Mogadiscio has
lost whatever shape it used to have and is now as featureless
as ground cog in a broken machine... Everywhere he looks, destitute
men, women, and children in near rags wearily trudge by, many of
them emaciated, their bellies swollen with undiagnosed illness, their
eyes hosts to swarms of roaming flies. They seem exhausted,
inarticulate with fear and vigilance, which imposes a further
formlessness. (165)

Formless, inarticulate, fear, swarms of flies, exhausted, near rags, destitute men, swollen bellies, undiagnosed illness, and vigilance. These are the words/expressions that illustrate the abjectness of the masses of the people. These are the new demographics of a people torn apart by the brutish unconscious of a world gone to the dogs. They are not male, female, aged, young, educated, etc. They are formless, inarticulate, swollen bellies, etc.

Invariably, external sovereignties are exploiters of local resources, using their interventions to fish and dump toxic waste in developing nations' territorial waters, thereby exploiting both the present and future of the developing nations. Thus, there is an imperialist hypocrisy that paints the fangs of imperialism in aids and social/economic exchanges, which inexorably become foreign occupation and barbarism.

Conclusion

Achille Mbembe asserts that, "the most original feature of modern terror is its propensity to turn the life of the enemy into a death-in-waiting "(92). This marks the life of the masses of the people in Somalia; they have been dragged into a cul-de-sac from where they cannot exit. They are inundated with visceral violence that is coloured in international flags and currencies. The wars waged in Somalia and in most third world countries are not just in the way St Thomas Aquinas had stipulated, rather there is a ruination that impoverishes the nations while killing off the young and virile population. The thoughtful Ahl's uses physiological imagery to highlight the dire straits Somalia finds itself:

Somalis are people in a fix; a nation with a trapped nerve; a country

in a terrible mess. The entire nation is caught up in a spiraling

degeneracy that a near stranger like me cannot make full sense.

It is all a fib, that is what it is, just a fib (214).

The image of 'a trapped nerve' illustrates the bleeding pain in the body politic, and without any surcease in sight; between the various factions and their knives cutting at the proverbial 'elephant', there are cycles of violence, terror, pain, chaos, personal and collective trauma that sees no abatement.

The converging of multi-foreign sovereignties create a melting pot of destructive energies that reduce every individual's luminal spaces to a battery of veiled and naked terror. The body of every Somalia, therefore, becomes a battlefield of sorts where heads have bullet holes, limbs misshapen into grotesque forms, dreams are beaten into a void that is pregnant with terror, and resisting bodies are broken and become the table upon which technological experiments on armament, toxic disposals, economic despoliation are carried out.

Everyone is caught up in the violence and terror in Mogadishu. No one is free. Age, sex, education, class, somebody, nobody, everyone has crossbones embossed as target on their backs. A mine exploding by the road-side can claim the life of anyone. A bullet may fell anyone. Any child may be conscripted to become a child-soldier. Any home can be 'consecrated' for use by a warlord or militia. The demographics lie in Somalia. No one is excused. Conventions of war do not apply. Only the bullet.

At the end of the day everybody is broken. No one is unscathed. Everyone loses. Somalia loses. Except the Internationals:

Apart from the Somalis, everyone else has been paid. Our consultants in London have received their shares; the Abu Dhabi middlemen, too; ditto the Suez Canal folks. Not a cent to the Somalis. We've done the dirty work and are the 'badguys' who are terrorizing the world's shipping lanes, but we haven't been paid (267).

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