

DESIRE UNDER THE TRIBE IN NURUDDIN FARAH'S *A NAKED NEEDLE* AND KEN N. KAMOCHÉ'S "SECONDHAND WIFE"

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Abstract: *This paper will address the notion of desire in Ken N. Kamoche's "Secondhand Wife" and Nuruddin Farah's A Naked Needle; it will be centered on the idea of men's and women's sexual desire as caught between being controlled and willing to be free. Desire will be studied as being controlled by the tribe in Kenya and Somalia, which channels men's and women's desire into pre-made forms. These channels of desire approved by the tribe are contested in Kenya and Somalia by both men and women. Desire is then situated between collective manipulation and individual freedom.*

Key words: *desire, freedom, Ken N. Kamoche, Nuruddin Farah, tribe*

1. Introduction

This paper is a study of the relationship between, on the one hand, the tribe both as an abstract notion and an institution and, on the other hand, the individual person's desire; it is about desire that wants to be free of tribal regulations but which is targeted by the tribe as a site of control. For this purpose, this paper will examine "Secondhand Wife" (2011), a short story by Kenyan author Ken N. Kamoche, and *A Naked Needle* (1976), the second Anglophone novel by Somali author Nuruddin Farah. The article is divided into three major parts: first, a study of the importance of tribes in Kenya and Somalia, second, a study of the relationship between desire and tribe in Somalia, and third, a study of the relationship between desire and tribe in Kenya. The aim of this study is to explore the differences between the tribal attempt to establish a homogeneous and uniform sphere of desire and the individual's venture at a more heterogeneous understanding of desire.

2. Desire under the Tribe

2.1. The Poetics of Tribe and Desire

A tribe can be defined as "a large group of related families who live in the same area and share common language, religion, and costumes" ("Tribe" def.1:1282); this definition stresses the existence of a space, which is characterized by quasi-identical values and habits—that is, a homogeneous place. Each tribe has its chieftain, who represents the locus of tribal power and traditions and functions as a reminder of the bases upon which each tribe is founded. One of the main definers of any tribe is the subject of marriage, where the individual is not in total freedom in his/her choice; as anthropologist David J. Parkin observes: "The concept of tribe is here used objectively by people to distinguish groups into which a person may or may not marry. It has extended reference for distinguishing kin and affines and appropriate obligations" (1971:273-4). The issue of marriage in the context of African tribes goes beyond the mere act of choosing to the question of the survival of the tribe and its

traditions; marriage is thus both functional and political. Marriage is seen by the tribe as a means to keep power and wealth within the same entity or to acquire more through the very act of marriage; inter-tribal marriages are only encouraged when they result in either economic or political gains for the tribe.

Indeed, the individual is never totally free in his/her decisions; even those, who have left the space demarcated by the tribe, are still themselves spaces occupied by the tribe. In other words, the individual is not merely a subject among other subjects but rather an object, which is both controlled and utilized by the tribe. According to South African social anthropologist Max Gluckman:

The moment an African crossed his tribal boundary, he was 'detribalized', outside the tribe, though not outside the influence of the tribe. Correspondingly, when a man returns from the towns into the political area of his tribe he is tribalized—de-urbanized. (qtd. in Mayer 1968:311)

The tribe is an omnipresent force that transcends the physical boundaries of the land it controls; the tribe inhabits not only a physical dimension but also a mental position, which is the hardest to escape. The tribe penetrates the whole social body of its members; it indicates for the individual a strict code of behavior to adhere to. This point will be the main focus in our study of Kamoche's "Secondhand Wife" and Nuruddin Farah's *A Naked Needle*, two texts which show how the tribe is ever-present in the form of a mental inhibiting dialectic.

Sexual desire as a notion is about two distinctive parts joined together to indicate a more wholesome notion: sexuality and desire. First, sexuality is linked to engaging in sex, that is, in bodily encounter with another entity including oneself; second, desire can be defined, among others, as that, according to Jacques Lacan, which "is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second" (1977:580). Sexual desire is thus the subject's yearning for something that is not a need but rather an additional plus, which is nevertheless seen by the subject as necessity; in other words, sexual desire is about what one does not have now but aspires to have in the future, which once achieved loses its connotation as desire because desire is always about what *is not* and not what *is*.

The tribe, as defined earlier, is a set of families linked by several factors, which differentiate them from others and empower them over others; sexuality and sexual desire are two tools to sustain the tribe and maintain its powers. Indeed, the sexual activities of the tribe's members are not essentially about an individual pleasurable activity but rather about a tribal collective entitlement; in other words, sexual desire is a tribal prerogative, which is used to further endorse the tribe's powers. Michel Foucault states in *The History of Sexuality* that:

Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies. (1978: 103)

The power relations, which govern the tribe and its individuals, are based on an understanding that sexuality and sexual desire are not the property of the individual but the possession of the tribe as a whole. To transcend this unwritten rule is to be written out of the tribe and to be detribalized; in other words, sexual desire should be always in accordance with the overall tribal policies. We may even speak of the poetics and the politics of sexual desire: first, the poetics stresses the existence of two agents engaged in a relationship similar to two intersecting circles, and second, the politics emphasize the existence of a triangle where the two partners are guided and supervised by the tribal collective mindset. One can even argue that sexuality is like "blood . . . a reality with a symbolic function" (Foucault 1978:147, emphasis in original); sexuality is a real and tangible activity with a hidden and intangible function, that of keeping the tribe pure, powerful and ever-progressing in its own stability.

The following segment is a study of the relationship between individual sexual desire and the collective tribal tenets; the two texts show two variations of a similar dialectic between the individual and the tribe in the context of Kenya and Somalia. The first text, *A Naked Needle*, portrays the refusal of Somali tribes to accept inter-religious and inter-national marriages. The second text, "Secondhand Wife," depicts a woman entrapped by the tribe of her late husband and forced to marry her brother-in-law.

2.2. Nuruddin Farah's *A Naked Needle*

A Naked Needle is the story of Koshin Qowdhan, an English teacher from Somaliland; the novel revolves around one day in the life of Koshin, when a woman by the name of Nancy is coming to fulfill an old promise of marriage by the age of thirty. Nonetheless, the story's overall main idea is centered on the clash between the tribal perceptions of marriage and that of the modern European-educated Somalis; the conflict arises around the women chosen by some Somalis as wives, who are either rejected for being white or non-Muslim. Some of these relationships are the ones, which join a Somali man and a non-Somali woman, such as the marriage between Barre and Mildred, Mohamed and Barbara, and Koshin and Nancy; for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the two first couples and the Somali tribe.

On the one hand, Mohamed, a Somali man, marries Barbara, who is an American; by marrying a non-Somali, "Mohamed took the title of being the first Somali ever to marry a foreigner in Mogadishu" (Farah 1976:72). The act of marrying a foreigner is seen by the Somali clans in Mogadishu as a source of rumor and "talk of town for months" (Farah 1976:72); Mohamed's marriage with Barbara is such an immense shock for the Somali clan that it results in Mohamed being at the heart of discourse for a long period. This shock is symbolic of two interrelated matters: first, Mohamed's marriage is perceived as a transgression and transcendence of the endorsed traditions of Somalia, second, Mohamed represents a new image of the Somali man—one who is willing to fulfill his individual perception of desire against the dogma of the collective position. In a discussion with Koshin, Barbara elaborates on the question of desire and the tribe:

And then we married in spite of everything. And I dreamt for him and he dreamt for me, for the country, for the possibilities of partaking in the development of something tangible. Dreams and dreams that have never materialized. Face to face we then were with reality, and we fought day and night for months on end. (Farah 1976:63)

Barbara's argument is centered on two facts: the clash with the tribe and the survival of dreams in a suffocating environment. Barbara's marriage is based on something that is not visible or tangible, that is, love; but, marriage and family are tangible institutions that cannot be unseen or unnoticed. She, an American woman, perceives her marriage to Mohamed as a materialization of love, which takes form in an accepted institution; Barbara thinks that by inscribing her love in a highly-upheld tribal establishment, she would escape the wrath of the tribe. She even states: "I must get used, not to the whole tribe" (Farah 1976: 64), but only to Mohammed, her husband and partner in a tribally-forbidden love. Nonetheless, it was all in vain because the marriage internalized the outer clash and the struggle became one between the couple rather than between the couple and the tribe. Quoting a Somali proverb, Barbara makes it clearer: "laba isu dhow wey dirirta; carab iyo daan kolay tahay" (Farah 1976:63), which translates as "of two close together they fight; tongue and jaw probably are" (Andrzejewski 1974:225); the jaw and the tongue, which are supposed to be part of the same system and attuned to each other, are in chaos resulting in the collapse of the whole system.

On the other hand, Barre, while being in an AID course at Minnesota, meets an American woman named Mildred; they "decided that each would love the other, decided on

their making it to their maximum ability” (Farah 1976:27); this description of the couple, which will face everyone and everything for the sake of their love, is romantic and reminiscent of a fairy-tale. But this fairy-tale-like love story is founded on a collection of lies made by Barre; Barre idealizes and romanticizes his Somali tribe as the “kin and kith [that] would welcome her [Mildred] into their midst as the daughter, the white daughter of the tribe, immediately as she c[o]me[s] to the country” (Farah 1976:36). Barre gives Mildred an image of an accepting tribe, which does not mind her whiteness and Christian faith, which are indicative of a double foreignness. Indeed, in Farah’s fourth novel, *Sardines*, the Somali tribe accepts the Arab Fatima Bint Thabet as a wife for a Somali man, because she shares with Somalis the same religion making her foreign on only one level, that of her ethnicity; the essential marking of differentiation, which the tribe cannot overlook or ignore, is religion rather than Somaliness.

In other words, the Somali tribe is depicted as being able to adjust itself to the needs of its members; but in reality, Mildred was “offere[d] . . . their hate in abundance” (Farah 1976:34), which is in sharp contrast with Barre’s presentation. Indeed:

Barre’s tribesmen have protested [. . .] She is a white whore, they have said, and you can’t keep a woman, a white woman, who is also a whore. Two principle sins that you can’t shoulder in the presence of God on the day [sic.] of judgment, they have said. (Farah 1976:30)

The association, between on the one hand Mildred’s whiteness and Christianity and the infamous image of the whore, is an association by absence between Somaliness and Islam and morality. Mildred is here rejected on religious grounds as the woman who is corrupt and possibly corrupting because of her identity; Islam is used to back the tribe’s claim of rejecting and denying Mildred the status of a tribally-approved wife of a Somali man. In a discussion between Koshin and an old man of his tribe, a verse from the Quran, Surat Al-Hujurat verse 13, is introduced: “And we divided you into nations and tribes in order that you might know one another better” (Farah 1976:13); the tribe, which presents itself as applying Islam in its daily interactions, seems either oblivious or unconcerned with this verse that encourages establishing ties between various human groups. Thus, one can argue that the tribe only uses Islam as a pretext and not because of strong conviction; Mildred is not rejected because she is not Muslim Somali but because she just represents the other, who is not understood by the I of the tribe.

In brief, *A Naked Needle* presents two instances where the individual’s desire is countered by the tribe, which forbids the individual from engaging in any unapproved form of desire; the individual, being a member of a Somali tribe, is forced into pre-made and pre-selected channels of desire. One can here refer to Foucault’s words: “Sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden” (Foucault 1978: 83); the Somali tribe, which is one of the major components of the Somali society, is based on an unwritten contract by which everything is regulated in accordance with the will of the collective tradition rather than individual aspiration. Sexuality, as a private act, is claimed by the tribe as a continuation of the communal and public space; sexuality is thus imprinted by the tribe’s doctrine, which sees sex and sexual desire as tools for the continuation and not a reversal of the status quo. Via sex and individual desire, the tribe brings to the foreground the traditions of the past and marks the present with the values of the past; via the same acts, the individual tries first to escape both the intangible traditions of the past and their tangible manifestations in the present and second to create a new status quo, which is both a refusal of the past/present and a foundation for a new future.

2.3. Ken N. Kamoche’s “Secondhand Wife”

A Naked Needle's problematization of the issue of desire locates itself in the dialectics of the Somali self and the foreign other; it focuses on the tribe's rejection of who and what is not Somali whether on the level of nationality, religion, or even color. As for Kamoche's "Secondhand Wife," it takes the issue of desire to a more intense level, where the tribe establishes a more detailed and scrutinized form of rejection; in "Secondhand Wife" those prevented from indulging in their personal desire, are not attached to non-Kenyan partners but to Kenyan partners belonging to other tribes. Thus we move from *A Naked Needle*'s general rejection of anyone, who does not adhere to the tribe's definition of the suitable and possible partner, to "Secondhand Wife"'s specific rejection of those who belong to the larger Kenyan space but not to the smaller tribal space.

First of all, we should give a brief summary of "Secondhand Wife". This short story accounts for a day in the life of a Kenyan woman named Anina, whose husband, Nyanga—a driver of a *matatu* minibus—dies in an accident in Nairobi; the funeral of Nyanga results in the unearthing of a dormant conflict between, on the one hand, Anina and her late husband and, on the other hand, the Nysisagene tribe.

Upon hearing the news about the death of her husband, Anina tries to explain to her daughter Toto the meaning of death and *eben*—Kenyan for heaven; in the midst of this, Anina remembers the beginning of her life as a wife of Nyanga where there was a discrepancy between the position of Anina's father-in-law and her mother-in-law: "Forest grandpa had been one of her few allies in Nyanga's clan. Unlike her mother-in-law, who disapproved of the interethnic marriage, her father-in-law was prepared to accept that she was right for his son" (2011:n.p.). This division about whether to accept or reject an inter-tribal marriage shows the two forces that govern the tribe in Kenya; the mother-in-law's position is but a reflection of a deeply-rooted belief that the tribe needs to stay pure and untainted by outside blood. Nonetheless, the father-in-law's position is symbolic of a move away from such tribal restrictions on inter-tribal marriages; but, his position is linked to Anina's financial capabilities: Anina "H[o]ld[s] down a good job in the city, working for an Indian trader, which for him was no mean achievement" (2011:n.p.). Anina's income is seen as an advantage that can be capitalized; Nyanga's and Anina's double income enables them to have a domestic helper and to consider buying "a plot in Kahawa West and build their own house" (2011:n.p.). Thus, the seemingly progressive views of the father-in-law only hide a practical aim, which is to help and assist her husband.

In a more direct confrontation between the mother-in-law—called Mama—and Anina's husband, the following dialogue occurs, which stresses the refusal of inter-tribal desire:

[Mama]"They're no good [. . .] And that tribe of theirs, do you know they eat snakes? [. . .] "I can't see how normal people can eat snakes."

[Nyanga] "It's just rumours, mama," protested Nyanga. "And you know they don't approve of our eating wild pigs. What's important is I love Anina. She's the only one for me." (2011: n.p.)

The logic behind Mama's refusal of the inter-tribal marriage is linked to the private life and traditions of Anina's tribe; the fear of the other is not based on reasonable or logical foundations but on food habits, for instance. But what is more interesting than Mama's accusations is Nyanga's response; Nyanga states that eating snakes is but gossip. The reasoning of Nyanga is rather apologetic and claims that eating snakes is but a rumor; but the main question here: Why does Nyanga not acknowledge the traditions of his wife's tribe? Why does he immediately resort to rejecting Anina's tribe traditions? One might argue that Nyanga is not confident of his choice of marrying outside of his tribe; he could not defend his wife's tribe. Again, just like his father, it seems that even the individual—involved in the inter-tribal marriage—is not able to justify his choice; the Kenyan tribes apparently still hold a

tight grip over their members whether consciously—as is the case with Mama—or unconsciously—as is the case with Nyanga.

Continuing with the same thought, in a clearer tribal involvement with the desire of its members, Anina is pressed to accept a proposal of a levirate marriage, which is a form of marriage forcing a widow to marry her brother-in-law; the tribe wants Anina and Ogondo to marry each other. This levirate marriage presents the reader with two problematic characters: Anina, the newly-widowed woman and Ogondo, her brother-in-law; both agree on refusing this marriage but for different reasons. What this marriage shows is that it is not only women who suffer under the tribe rigid system of power, but men do also suffer from it.

Abudo, the head of the Nyisagene tribe and Nyanga's uncle, is the source of the proposal for a levirate marriage; he states that it is not his decision but the tradition of Nyanga's tribe, to which she married:

[Abudo] "You know our customs!" he declared. "The clan has chosen Ogondo for you. He will be your new husband. Our daughter [Toto] will not wander around the city streets like a prostitute. The cows and goats Nyanga paid for you will not have been in vain, you hear?" (2011: n.p.)

The reason behind the levirate marriage is the customs of the late husband's tribe; the tribe perceives Anina as a possession, which needs to be kept within the space controlled by the tribe. Indeed, Abudo declares that the bride price given by Nyanga must not leave the tribe; eventually, this proposal, given the veneer of protecting the reputation of Toto and Nyanga, is only aimed at safeguarding the wealth within the tribe of Nyanga and not losing it to another man's tribe.

This marriage proposal suggested by Abudo is both rejected by Anina and Ogondo. Anina, in an attempt to strip Abudo of any pretext for persisting on this marriage, declares that he and the tribe "can take everything" that was left to her by Nyanga; Abudo immediately rejects her suggestion and declares that "if [she] cho[o]se[s] to ignore, that is [her] funeral" (2011:n.p.). The death threats made by Abudo made Anina sick and she vomits "within inches of Abudo's feet" (2011:n.p.); she rose her finger in his face, made suggestions but all in vain, resulting in her physical collapse symbolic of her present defeat in the face of a persistent tribal tradition. Nevertheless, Anina ultimately declares: "You will have to kill me first! I will not be a secondhand wife!" (2011:n.p.); her rejection of being a secondhand wife is a refusal of having her freedom taken from her and a denunciation of the tribal claim to her body as a site for enforcing tribal power. In uttering her rejection, Anina moves from being silent and voiceless to voicing and articulating her will to choose her fate; one can argue that the tribe expects Anina to fit the image of the woman as depicted in the following passage from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Courtship of Miles Standish":

[. . .] for it is the fate
of a woman
Long to be patient and silent, to wait like a
ghost that is speechless,
Till some questioning voice dissolves the spell of
its silence. (1858:76)

Longfellow's poem depicts women as beings, who are voiceless in the making of their future; instead of voicing themselves by themselves, others voice women on their behalf. The tribe functions in this manner, in which women are supposed to be observers of their destiny which is created by external agents. In the tribe, women' desire is like a play enacted on the stage with an audience composed of only the women, whose lives are written and enacted; they see their lives performed and formulated without having the possibility of intervening—they are mere spectators. Anina, nonetheless, presents a challenge to this tribal perception of women;

Anina occupies the stage, becomes a true actor in and writer of her life and puts the tribe in the position of the spectator not the playwright.

In continuation of the analysis of the levirate marriage, Ogondo, who also rejects it, is described as “the only one who was yet unmarried [. . .] quiet and unassuming” (2011:n.p.); he represents a different image of the tribal man, who is usually seen as a leader and as arrogant in his manhood. Indeed, upon refusing to marry Anina, Ogondo’s manhood is put into question by his uncle: “If you knew anything about women you would be married by now” (2011:n.p.); the attack on Ogondo is an attack on the representational and symbolic manhood offered by Ogondo, which is both unorthodox in and unaccepted by the tribe. Ogondo’s refusal of the levirate marriage is linked in his own words to the question of mutual intimacy: “Uncle, please . . . I don’t want [. . .] I can’t . . . what about love?” (2011: n.p.); Ogondo’s understanding of marriage is not one that is supported by the tribe, which sees marriage as rather an institution of control of men over women not of mutual co-existence.

Ogondo’s inability to convince his uncle of the impossibility of marrying Anina is met with a damnatory statement by Abudo, in which Ogondo “will live under the shadow of the angry spirits. The clan will not forgive [him] until this [marriage] is done” (2011:n.p.). Here Ogondo is rejected by both Abudo, symbolic of the present status-quo in the tribe, and by the past and traditions of the tribe, seen in the spirits of the ancestors; Ogondo’s unwillingness to marry Anina strips him of both his past and his present and forbids him from engaging in the future of his tribe. Being a man does not prevent Ogondo from being defeated by the tribe personified in Abudo; the image of Ogondo given towards the end of this short story is but indicative of an ever-powerful tribe: “Ogondo bent forward and slapped the ground with both hands, bowing low and letting out a mournful wail that tore like a clap of thunder through the chilly night” (2011:n.p.); as it was the case with Anina, the physical fall is symbolic of a defeat and a failure to make the collective tribal attitude succumb to the individual will for the freedom to choose a partner. Ogondo, in the act of wailing, mourns his life, which is controlled by the tribe; he also mourns his inability to escape the darkness of the tribal traditions into the literal and metaphorical light of the city.

To sum up, the levirate marriage practiced by many Kenyan tribes has managed to survive and carve itself a space, where it is the norm not the exception; the defeat of Ogondo and the apparent ongoing battle Anina is undergoing with Abudo are both indications of the conflict, which is emerging between the conservative inner-tribal circle and the rebellious wing of the tribe. Desire, which is supposed to be about an individual enjoyment, is seen by the tribe as the site for control and for the fostering of long-held traditions about continuity and proprietorship; between individuality or collectivity and mutual pleasure or forced slavery, desire in the context of the Kenyan tribe is caught in a battle over whose views will triumph and whose will be defeated. In other words, desire is used either to erase the individual freedom by the tribe or to erase the possessiveness of the tribe by the individual.

3. Conclusion

In brief, Nuruddin Farah’s *A Naked Needle* and Ken N. Kamoche’s “Secondhand Wife” present the dialectics of desire within the framework of both the Somali and Kenyan tribes. These dialectics are entangled in two contradictory paths: first, the tribal system of control of everything including the desire of its members, and second, the individual aspiration to carve a private space for his/her desire. The two texts highlight the conflict between the tribal insistence on publicizing the individual desire and the individual fight to maintain the private attribute of desire; the issue of desire under the tribe is mainly about whether or not desire should be or will continue to be essentially under the tribe, that is, made within the limits of the tribal space and under the control of the tribe. The studied texts expose

three critical matters: firstly, the tribal control of desire is inflicted on both men and women; secondly, there is a rising tendency to counter this tribal control by means of either international-religious relationships or by rejecting one's desire to be tribally conceived; thirdly, despite the individual fight for self-definition of desire, the tribe still perceives itself as the source of the (il)legitimization of desire, where the latter is "an object and a target" (Foucault 1978: 147) in the overall power relations. Thus, the problem of desire and the tribe is both an issue of either having an inner- or an outer-understanding of the member's desire and furthermore an issue of desire as either a personal affair or a contested matter between the individual and the tribe, to which he/she belongs.

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