
Cambara's Rehabilitation of Child Soldiers in Nuruddin Farah's *Knots*: Possibilities and Contradictions

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the phenomenon of child soldiers and the need for their rehabilitation. In Nuruddin Farah's novel *Knots* (2007), Cambara returns to the country of her birth—the war-torn Somalia—after fifteen years of stay in Canada. This return, with the chief mission being to reclaim her family's property, brings her into direct interaction with children of the Somali conflict who have been indoctrinated on the power of the gun, propaganda of words, and drugs. We analyze how, amidst her own entanglements, Cambara de-indoctrinates the children by providing them with parental guidance, and alternative activities, life-skills, and narratives, and a place they can call home. This essay further examines the significance of the NGO Women's Network for Peace and calls upon other NGOs to assist in the restoration of peace in Somalia.

Keywords: Nuruddin Farah; *Knots*; child soldiers; indoctrination; rehabilitation; reintegration.

INTRODUCTION

In Nuruddin Farah's novel *Knots* (2007) Cambara, a middle-aged woman, returns to Somalia the country of her birth after about fifteen years to reclaim her family's property in Mogadiscio (the country's capital city) from a minor warlord who lives in it in the conflict-ridden and clan-divided city. Cambara has also returned to be able to create physical and emotional distance from Canada from her estranged husband who she blames for the death of their son, Dalmar; Cambara needs space to grieve for her son. The two missions—repossessing family property and mourning her son bring her into direct interaction with some aspects of the Somalia war that has been going on for twelve years now. Prominent among these aspects is the use of children as soldiers in armed conflict, a matter that has dominated discussions in meetings, conferences and writings about conflicts the world over, especially since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was enacted in 1989 which defines a child as one from age of birth to the age of 15 years. This was further enhanced in the UN convention on the Rights of the Child in 2000 which banned the use of soldiers under the age of eighteen (Burnett 140). Various literatures indicate that by most international standards a child is defined as up to 18 years of age (Felton 45). But many countries do not adhere to this international standard. Nonetheless, since the beginning of this century many institutions and individuals have advocated for the observance of this benchmark and cases where children have already been conscripted there have been calls for these children to be reclaimed from these conflicts, rehabilitated, and given back their lost childhood. In Farah's *Knots* Cambara is the voice of these campaigns as she unravels the child-soldier phenomenon and provides solutions. Whereas Cambara may seem well-intentioned, she unavoidably gets into complicated emotional entanglements which raise misgivings regarding the honesty and even possibility of success of her rehabilitation program of some of the children affected by the war. It is this Cambara attempt that this essay will analyze and examine the options available to her in her rehabilitation and reintegration mission of these children. Whereas her intentions may be good, she sometimes approaches the issue in a rather condescending and imposing manner. This essay will examine this incongruity.

Cambara laments the abuse and misuse that children of Somalia continue to undergo in this war since political and civil governance broke down with the overthrow of the dictator president Siyad Barre in January 1991. Members of some of the families of some of the children have died in the conflict; some children's entire families have been exterminated, and with no adults to fend for them the

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children have had to find ways of survival. In *Knots* for instance Gacal’s father who is a Somali expatriate living in the USA is kidnapped by the militia during a visit with his son to Somalia and most likely he is later killed; and SilkHair’s parents are probably already dead in this conflict. Furthermore the issue of safety has become pertinent in Somalia whereby the gun has become the surest way of one guaranteeing himself security and sustenance. People in Mogadishio feel secure when they are with someone on their side of the conflict who has a gun so that even if some of the youths who escort Cambara wherever she wants to go are in their preteen years (Farah 2007: 85) as long as they are with an AK-47 there is a feeling of safety. These are the escorts that she finds under the charge of her cousin, Zaak. The escorts are meant to protect the truck they are travelling in from being attacked by other armed gangs, for gangs rule the city (87). This is a reality that Cambara has to accept gradually and live with; for after all, she will need the escorts in order to accomplish the mission of reclaiming the family property from a Mogadishio warlord. She acknowledges, however, that this is child abuse.

Children as young as seven years have been drafted into conflicts and been made to carry guns in many wars all over the world even in regular government armed forces despite the 2000 UN ban on the use of children under eighteen years as soldiers. For instance, some of the soldiers in the USA regular army who take part in the Mogadishio mission in October 1993, to hunt down Farah Aidid, the Somali warlord are “pimply teenagers” (Bowden 22) and they are poorly trained (ibid 58). And the USA has continued to use child soldiers in many other conflicts; for instance, seventeen-year olds are sent to Bosnia and the first Gulf War (Burnett 141). This coming from the USA—so called champion of human rights—may surprise us but the USA is not alone, in that even in the UK a third of the recruits of the armed forces are below eighteen (ibid).

In Africa which has faced many conflicts in the last three decades, Emmanuel Jal is drafted into the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) at seven years old bearing a gun which is taller than him (Jal & Davies 2), and Ishmael Beah who fought on both the rebel side and the government side in the Sierra Leone civil war in the 1990s narrates in *A Long Way Gone* (2007) how boys as young as seven years bear arms too heavy for them (112) and how he himself at thirteen years is frightened when he is first assigned his own gun: “with trembling hands I took the gun saluted, ... and ran to the back of the line, still holding the gun but afraid to look at it (111); and SilkHair the youngest soldier in the Cambara escorts group in Nuruddin Farah’s *Knots* is ten years old. This recruitment of children at these ages is an abuse of their childhood and it leads to improper development and has psychological and emotional long-term repercussions. And nearly all the children join the Forces through some form of coercion. For instance according to McDonnell and Akallo about 90% of Uganda’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) is comprised of abducted children (116).

The children become systematically and continuously brainwashed to a point that they forget the initial coercion to join the conflict. Part of the indoctrination that the youths undergo is that with guns they are invincible and that as long as they have guns they are lords. In the SPLA camp a commander tells the boys to “always remember: the gun is your mother and father now” (94), words that are echoed by Col. John Garang, the SPLA leader when he visits the camp (96) meaning that this is a SPLA rallying statement. The children are even told that guns are much more important than food, than life: “if you are walking across a desert, throw your food away but keep your gun and bullets. If you are crossing a river, let the water pull you down, but keep your gun and bullets” (ibid 90). In *Knots* those being escorted are hostages to the guns of the youth, the youths point guns at the heads of their escorts “whenever they want to blackmail you into granting them more concessions than you are prepared to grant “We do their will, bribe them with *Qaat*, pay them extravagant bonuses,” Zaak tells Cambara (85-86). The youths intimidate and instill fear in others in order to get their way. As part of their early training they watch other soldiers kill as they witness the merciless power of the gun and thereafter the child soldiers are told to kill their close relatives such as parents and siblings. Then they are taken into massive annihilation of the enemy so that they see for themselves the power of the gun and this is meant to instill brute courage in them that with the gun everything is possible.

It is no surprise that children used to guns feel utterly insecure in the minimalist absence of the gun, reminiscent of the sort of insecurity such a child would feel in the absence of his mother and father, in a normal setup. In fact the child soldiers are the real captives of their own guns and they appear wretched without the guns. During a cleaning exercise Cambara tells them to put their guns away, and she observes, “how clumsy they appear now that they are missing their weapons, which over the

years have become extensions of themselves; With their bodily movements uncoordinated” (98). Furthermore they need protection from these very guns that they carry around for most of them have barely had a proper military training, and this reminds us that Ismael Beah and his team are trained for only two days and on the third day they bear guns heading for battle (Beah 112). With such rudimentary training in their use of arms one of the youths in *Knots* unwittingly pulls the trigger and shoots into the roof of the truck they are travelling in (90) causing the 10-year old SilkHair the youngest boy in the Cambara escort squad to pee on himself out of fear and shock (91). Even if the accident caused is not of bodily harm to SilkHair or any other person in the truck, the emotional damage on SilkHair is immense since the peeing results in him feeling ashamed and aloof for the rest of the journey. Part of Cambara’s rehabilitation task is to de-glorify the gun; Cambara literally commands the boys to put their guns away and work with their hands cleaning-up Zaak’s apartment. The way that she goes about this is rather domineering; she does not negotiate with the youths and this may seem a rather harsh and drastic rehabilitative measure but it is notable that the youths obey. Cambara is passing a message to the youths that they need not worship guns all the time, and that they need to engage in other activities. Here Cambara is an activist on a mission; after all, she has earlier vowed to turn SilkHair into a cause (94) and “to prove to Zaak and to the boy soldiers that her mettle is of a harder stuff than all theirs put together” (ibid). This reminds us that Cambara is a martial artist, make-up artist, actress, journalist, playwright, theatre director, among others, and these are pursuits that need a proactive approach.

Children do not have the emotional and psychic composure to handle fear and the sight of blood and deaths even when it has been drilled into their minds that they are killing the enemy who has caused them a lot of trouble including even killing their parents. In *Warchild* Emmanuel Jal longs for the battlefield so that he can revenge the death of his parents but he is emotionally devastated when he sees so many dead, some of whom he has himself taken part in killing, and concludes that there is no victory in killing (164-165). In *Knots* SilkHair is well aware that at his age he is not suppose to handle firearms (Farah 2007: 94) but that he has been forced to do so by the circumstances of the civil war. SilkHair already indicates, even before Cambara begins to rehabilitate him, that given the chance he, and indeed other child soldiers, can be responsible. The child soldiers need other forms of security than the external AK-47 security and indeed it is the argument of *Knots* that these children need internal security generated by self-confidence and an assured self-esteem cultivated through a nurturing and loving family. It is the position of Farah’s novel that in the situation they are now the youths are not secure; that they are a haggard lot (88) who themselves need protection. It is this other protection and assurance that Cambara attempts to give those youths whom she interacts with.

The matter of SilkHair peeing on himself is quite revealing. He is an orphan who must carry a gun to raise himself and he knows no other way of doing this with some modicum of safety other than join some gang group. He has not been able to complete his childhood, was not probably able to wipe himself after long call before he was plucked from parental and family care and love by this conflict that is raging in his country. In the Mogadiscio of gangs, SilkHair would have been thoroughly insulted, taunted and humiliated for being such a coward and desecrating the truck causing an odor and ordered to clean up immediately, but with Cambara’s presence things go a bit differently with only one boy calling SilkHair a shitloose. Zaak’s attempt to have SilkHair disembark from the truck is rebuffed by Cambara who says that the boy has done nothing out of the ordinary (92). And later Cambara orders two of the boys to clean up the excrement from the truck. Throughout this whole encounter Cambara takes charge as parent and as elder, a role that she will continually play in the coming days and weeks. That she wins this first battle shows that the vision of this novel is that these war children being children whose innocence has been stolen from them should be given compassion, care, attention, and love, for instance at one point: “a mere glance can tell her [Cambara] how pleased he [SilkHair] is to stand physically close to her” (ibid 94). And part of this attention is given when children are assigned responsibilities to carry out, supervised, congratulated and rewarded. This view is supported by Garbarino *et al* (1991:19) who state that a nurturing environment builds self-confidence and positive self-esteem which helps children in a war zone to cope with the state of despair that exists. It is Cambara’s position that what the youths need is an opportunity to live and enjoy their childhood. Cambara tells others to clean up SilkHair’s mess since in Cambara’s understanding SilkHair is still a child who cannot even be able to clean the mess properly.

Many studies acknowledge the significance of parents and the influence of other family members such as grandparents and siblings in the positive growth of a child. According to Gabarino *et al* a

stable emotional relationship with at least one parent or other reference person is an essential component of growth. Children without a close family relationship long for attachment and it is no wonder that the children with close attachment to their families feel devastated without the families. Ishmael Beah has a close relationship with both of his parents and his siblings before the conflict in Sierra Leone tears him away from the comfort of home. His parents take an active involvement in his life, for instance by attending the soccer games that he plays: “both my parents were at the game, and at the end, my mother applauded and smiled widely, her face glowing with pride. My father walked up to me and rubbed my head before he held my right hand and raised it up, as he declared me his champion (Beah 102). Remembrance of such family setup serves as a pillar of hope for the fighting soldier that he will have somewhere and people to return to after child soldiering. The hope of returning to a loving family gives the abducted child hope to live on even when the child is not sure if the family members are alive. Even when the child knows that the parents are dead, the foundation given by them serves as impetus to live on and be optimistic. In any case such parents serve as positive role models. There are instances when a child would like to emulate a parent; for example, Emmanuel Jal sees his father as a protector and powerful (Jal & Davies 21) and from quite early on in life he wants to be like his father, Baba. This has positive impact for his growth in high self-esteem and confidence, but this too has negative influences when the father indoctrinates his son about manliness. Family makes a child feel protected and nurtured so that as hunger bites and the fighting moves closer to Jal’s home area he longs for his dead mother’s security and sustenance (ibid 37).

In Nuruddin Farah’s *Knots* Cambara grew up in a nurturing family with a strong mother as the cornerstone, and it is this strength that Cambara had hoped to pass on to her son, Dalmar, but unfortunately he dies in a drowning accident some time before Cambara returns to Somalia. This death affects Cambara profoundly for she feels that she has lost herself, and it is partly in the hope of mourning him and finding herself that she journeys to the country of her birth. For her, finding herself means constituting a family that can give her the joy she used to get from Dalmar. So when Cambara meets SilkHair and immediately notices that he reminds him of Dalmar, she believes she can use SilkHair to reconstitute a family and find herself. Cambara believes that this was preordained when she finds that Dalmar’s clothes fit SilkHair well (Farah 2007: 92). Handing these clothes to SilkHair is part of her mourning, and not exactly letting go of Dalmar since she has given the clothes to someone she wants to be around with and monitor. ‘Finding herself’ means finding something to live for; no wonder she says that she would turn SilkHair into a cause for the child soldiers to prove her mettle. And right from the beginning SilkHair does not disappoint; for instance, before accompanying Cambara on some errand SilkHair removes bullets from his gun, and then leaves the gun behind with the other boys. This is a responsible act which shows that he does not want to carry the gun when he is with his protector (Cambara) but also she does not want to leave bullets inside the machine in case the other boys misuse the bullets. SilkHair easily acquiesces to Cambara after Cambara stands by him in the peeing incident and she is a person SilkHair can trust—she is the other reference person that Gabarino *et al* (19) talk about. The idea of turning SilkHair into a ‘cause’ may seem rather at the lips—externally spoken about out there in the public domain and this ‘cause’ tag waters down Cambara’s professed intention to adopt SilkHair and engage the matter at the private sphere. But this is really the nature of dealing with the child soldier issue—it is both a public and private matter and Cambara wants to create a balance between the two. In as much as she would like to rehabilitate SilkHair and even adopt him, she also would like the matter of SilkHair (and other child soldiers) dealt with at the public arena by NGOs, donors, governments, and other institutions.

We may criticize Cambara for rehabilitating the boys and yet continuing to use them as escorts on her various missions, but we ought to understand that it would have been difficult to suddenly pull them away from their soldierly life and plunge them into another life altogether without some form of transition. Cambara intends to wean the youths slowly from their role as child soldiers, since a sudden withdrawal can be dangerous. In *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, Romeo Dallaire in his study of the entire spectrum of child soldiering, has said that child soldiers need to be taken through a systematic process of removal from the war front and to the reunification with their families and communities, in the following order: disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration. Disarmament and demobilization are the easier part, while rehabilitation and reintegration are the tougher part which usually take a much longer time and these do require monitoring so that the children do not go back to bearing arms. Rehabilitation is a period during which the child soldier undergoes a period of reorientation and transition into his former life under

some institution as happens for Ishmael Beah in a UNICEF Camp. Here Beah goes through counseling and is slowly reconnected with the good things of his life—such as rap music—before he joined the war (Beah 154). While the child is at rehab efforts are made to trace his family so that in the final stage—reintegration—he is reunited and readmitted into family and community. Dallaire urges that there is a need for donors, NGOs and Media to focus on the reintegration of child soldiers although this can take a long time: “The largest truth here, which I’ve stressed a number of times so far, is that simple technical solutions are rarely enough, and reintegration requires long-term commitment from donors and foreign agencies, yes, but also total dedication on the part of community and nation” (Dallaire 174).

Without a proper handling of disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation the consequences can be dire for reintegration as Clair MacDougall discovers when she studies former child soldiers of Liberia. She finds out that Liberia has not fully carried out a reconciliation and rehabilitation program after the civil wars of the 1990s. After the end of the wars the boy soldiers may have been accommodated in the political system for instance by joining the army, but the girl soldiers were unable to reintegrate as they were shunned and many of them were left to live in the slums, often as prostitutes (MacDougall 22). Most girl soldiers return from war with children whom they mostly obtained as a result of rape or as sex slaves of the warlords. This is not peculiar to Liberia as numerous narratives of war indicate (e.g McDonnell & Akallo; Jal & Davies; Beah). Rape is regarded with shame in many societies and girls who are raped lose their self-dignity as they consider themselves worthless. Most victims do not even report or talk about rape for fear that they will not get married. In most cases the victims are blamed for what happened and it is because of this that they keep quiet and suffer in silence. By many societies’ standards, the communities that the girl soldiers return to consider the children of the girl soldiers illegitimate and do not accept them. As Okaka Opio Dokotum as argued in his study of war documentaries about the Uganda Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in most cases the returning soldiers are rejected by their communities or even attacked because of the atrocities they are known to have committed under orders from the LRA commanders (Dokotum 13). And a good number of child mothers reject their children too because they remind them of the shame and pain that bore the offspring. The former girl soldiers feeling thus rejected remain violent because present society has refused to rehabilitate them and empower them; hence they resort to violence to exercise a feeling of power and self-worth. The violence of the past haunts them and in order to exorcise the nightmares that plague them they have to turn violent. To these former child soldiers “living with the guilt of their participation in atrocities is just as terrifying as the trauma of abduction” (ibid). The violent things done while in war haunt the soldiers leading them to being stuck in the past unable to move on “trapped between the past and the future, still unwilling or unable to let go of . . . wartime identity as fighter[s], which, if nothing else, offered a sense of purpose and direction” (MacDougall 21). According to Freud the mind goes into a state of shock on experiencing violence and the full effect of the violence only emerges later in terms of dreams, nightmares and painful reminders of the event (qtd. in Dokotum 8). This equally happens to boy soldiers as we see in the case of Emmanuel Jal who never goes through rehabilitation but is taken directly from warfront to classroom. He is unable to adjust; he is violent and he eventually leaves school.

Communities need proper education on issues of children being forced into war and being brutalized and victimized. Societies have to be educated to understand the circumstances under which the child soldiers operate and under which girl soldiers get the children that society considers illegitimate. As Halima Bashir has argued in her memoir *Tears of the Desert* based on her life in Sudan’s Darfur, rape victims need to speak out since this is the surest way of healing and getting society to understand the issue. Bashir’s memoir of surviving the horrors of racial discrimination, mass annihilation of her people and her individual rape which describes in lurid details her rape by Sudan government soldiers is a testimony of the physical and psychological torture of rape in war zones. But her story is also a narrative of determination, resilience and survival. As *Tears of the Desert* shows the rapists’ machine is a chain to which nearly all perpetrators of a conflict have a role. No wonder that in Uganda’s LRA boy soldiers are forced to rape women captured so that early enough they are initiated into the culture of rape as a weapon of war (McDonnell & Akallo 118). Cases of sodomy also take place (Dallaire 88) meaning that it is not only girls who suffer the pain and humiliation of their bodies being profaned. From the foregoing it is pertinent for child soldiers to undergo a proper process of rehabilitation before being reintegrated into society since it is at rehab that the soldiers can begin to be cleansed off the evils of their times in war as happens in the case of Beah and others when they are put in

rehabilitation before being reunited with their families. Rehabilitation is an opportunity for counseling and Cambara is doing some form of rehab for Gacal and SilkHair. At the Cambara ‘rehabilitation Centers’ [i.e at Zaak’s apartment and Kiin’s Hotel) the children take part in worthwhile activities such as cooking, cleaning, playing, and leisure (storytelling and watching movies). Later when she reclaims the family property, the property becomes a ‘rehabilitation center’ where Gacal and SilkHair rehearse their roles in the play *The Eagle and the Chickens* by Cambara that is performed at the end of the novel. The rehearsals and performance of the play is part of the rehabilitative process. In the Cambara rehabilitation centers the children are being reconnected to the lives they lived become they got involved in the war so that upon their reunification with their families reintegration would be more amicable.

Those who use children as soldiers have perfected a script in which they systematically indoctrinate children with ideas of despise for life and humanity. The militias tell the children that their enemies are the ones responsible for their problems such as the deaths of their parents and ask the children to fight to avenge the loss of their loved ones. Courage and fearlessness, utter hatred for the enemy, and a lack of respect for human life are instilled in the child soldiers; indeed for most of them their first ‘heroic’ deed is to brutally kill their close relatives seen as the enemy. For the case of Uganda’s LRA the children are made to kill their own parents in order to dehumanize them (the children) and make them ready to be LRA killers (McDonnell & Akallo 117). According to LRA dictates every abducted child is required to kill another child within a week of being abducted (ibid 118). Militia leaders have even been known to make the children consume some of the body parts of those that they kill (McDougall 24). This is intensive brutalization that prepares the children to accept orders to kill.

Apart from the indoctrination through brute force, words too play a role. As Garbarino *et al* have observed ideology figures prominently since it helps mitigate conditions of extreme danger (24). As we have noted Jal’s father begun to instill ideas of manliness in Jal right from when Jal was a mere child. He fed him with an adult point of view telling him why the SPLA was fighting the Sudan government (Jal & Davies 21), inculcating in him views about struggle and liberation of his people. Robbed of childhood at only 7 years old Jal is told to be brave at war and not shame his family. His father drills into him that he carries the responsibility for family and community, and this indoctrination in which heroism is glorified and idolized is largely responsible for Jal yearning for war. In Jal the SPLA system achieves its purpose when he imbibes adult ideas and uses them as if they were his own. The opponents are depicted as traitors who are non-human and even regarded as insects (Dallaire 90). The propaganda continues throughout the children’s time in the conflict; for instance in *Warchild* the SPLA officers address the boys with emotional speeches about the SPLA victories and goodness (69). It is inculcated in them that they are fighting a just war of liberation and the officers indoctrinate the children with a philosophy of courage, and hate of the Sudanese Arabs. Indoctrination about defending one’s honour and land works quite well for the case of the Somali children who take part in the conflict during the American invasion of Mogadishio in October 1993. The children are rather unafraid and indeed careless but the hate messages and rallying call from the Somali leader Farah Aidid for every Somali to “come out and defend your homes!” (Bowden 55) is enough verbal intoxication for them to offer their lives for this cause against what they see as the American imperialist enemy. Children become adults rather soon as they mouth the slogans of adults and even conscript fellow children into the conflict (Garbarino *et al* 63). For the children, “ideology is mainly a matter of compelling stories that relate the child’s personal experiences to experiences in the community and the future” (Garbrino *et al* 26). At the Refugee Camp in *Warchild* the elders narrate stories of black Sudanese heroism and hope that if the children fight they will return to their former homes and live in peace. The songs and chants of courage and defiance that they recite (Jal & Davies 82, 95, 96), and the movies they watch in *A Long Way Gone* (which make them believe that they should put into practice whatever they have watched) heighten the brainwashing.

From the foregoing, anyone wishing to rescue a child soldier faces an onerous task; in *Knots* Cambara has to provide an alternative to this brainwashing. She understands that children need to be offered alternative narratives, and be provided with different forms of entertainment and pastime activities, and hobbies from the ones that they participated in while in the conflict. In *Knots* SilkHair and Gacal take acting roles in the play *The Eagle and the Chickens* written and directed by Cambara. The play is based on an oral parable from Ghana and “the primary way that roots and connections are forged in *Knots* is through storytelling, a mode of transmission that, in the novel, is connected to performance”

(Lagji 23). The parable is about an eagle that is brought up among chickens and thinks that he is a chicken too, choosing to stick close to the ground. When the eagle is removed and taken to a mountain and made to look at the sun, he extends his wings and flies. Contrary to what the child soldiers have been drilled to believe by their leaders the parable offers a moral lesson to the children that they are capable of changing their situation. In taking part in the play the two boys participate in what they really like and this helps boost their self-worth and esteem and they are proud of doing something that they enjoy. Acting enables the boys improve their language and communicative skills and their confidence levels, and the collaboration required in rehearsals and acting is an opportunity for bonding. The fact that Gacal continues to be in the play even after being reunited with his mother indicates that he has found a passion for himself and shows that perhaps there is some hope in the youths affected by war and the entire Somalia so that the driver’s words of “there is time yet to save ourselves. There is hope yet for us to regain peace” (Farah 2007: 100), may not be far-fetched. It is not lost on the reader that the Mogadiscio of *Knots* seems the most peaceful that this city has been since anarchy set in fifteen years before. This is likely the time when a large part of the city is controlled by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) who rule with a strict Islamic code. Whereas pockets of Mogadiscio did come under Islamic Courts Union law in some scattered years of the 1990s decade (Elmi), the period that most significantly experienced ICU leadership was 2005-2006 and upto then this was arguably the most peaceful time for Mogadiscio since the end of Siyad Barre’s regime. Nuruddin Farah himself did visit Somalia in August 2006 at the invitation of ICU as an emissary of peace between them and the Somali Transitional Federal Government that had been established some time before but was having difficulty in administering the country. It is about the same time that Cambara returns to Somalia and although Farah’s own mission failed (*New York Times*) Cambara is determined and positive that hers will succeed.

With the assistance and funding from the NGO Women’s Network for Peace Cambara’s play is successfully staged at Cambara’s family property to a select audience many of whom come from all over the world taking advantage of the window of peace in the city. Even Arda, Cambara’s mother, attends. At the party that Arda hosts at the end of the novel, SilkHair and Gacal are happy to be children, having an opportunity that they have not had for a long time. The role of the Women’s Network for Peace shows that organizations can take a part in rescuing children from war, and be peacemakers since the Network is an alternative model of governance in the absence of a centralized government (Lagji 3). In the novel the Network is entrusted with the task of reconstruction. The organization provides a different narrative of governance and even among the war Militias there are linkages that assist the Network to accomplish her objectives. The message of the novel is that wherever there is a problem of conflict NGOs should provide guidance and assistance in matters such as healthcare and arbitration as happens with the Women’s Network for Peace.

In addition to the verbal propaganda the child soldiers are intoxicated with alcohol and drugs such as cocaine, heroin, hashish, and marijuana to numb their bodies toward any feelings of pain and feelings of sympathy and instill in them brute courage: “we were like machines most of the time as long as we had enough drugs” (Dallaire 91). And with drugs in the blood of the children it was easy to indoctrinate them about the ideology of the war:

“For three days he spent all his spare time with me. We would sit and chew hashish or smoke marijuana and I would fly and fly. He discussed our higher purpose of freedom with me as if I was an adult. He pushed me on the reasons for the cruelty, the reasons for the horrors, why it was important to fight back and even kill people. He pushed me: could I do it? I couldn’t answer and that annoyed Gamba, but he would continue to talk and gave me the drugs that I needed to create the numbness I craved. Constant and repetitious words driven into our ears and minds, drills and drugs day in day out, following orders because of the drugs and to get more drugs (ibid 91).

It is this sort of numbing that helps the children to commit unfathomable atrocities. According to Ishmael Beah, in most instances the children combine various drugs which give them a lot of energy and make them fierce. The drugs make the children easy to control and easy to be expended with (Kiener 20). Indeed in some of the conflicts children are sent ahead (as fodder for death) to scout and detect dangers such as clear landmines, and attract the enemy’s fire (Dallaire 79) in which case they are easily exterminated. After the intense intoxication with propaganda and drugs it is easy to

understand how some of the children readily become suicide bombers in such groups as Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, Taliban in Afghanistan and the Palestinian Hamas (Felton 30). Drugs make one insane, so that on leaving the war the children need treatment. It is not easy for the children since initially they miss the life of drugs that they were so used to.

In the novel *Knots* the most common drug is *qaat* (which by some people’s classification is a stimulant) chewed by almost all males—young and old—in Mogadishio. Zaak believes that all that the youth need is *qaat* and he himself consumes it for its effect of numbness: “*qaat* chewing helps me bear the aloneness of life” (8) says Zaak. According to a UN report Somali militia members chew *Qaat* to combat fear and fatigue, and be able to cope with the anxiety and uncertainty and the leaders reckon that *qaat* keeps the troops loyal (Burnett 58) and these are similar to the reasons for the consumption of other hard drugs like heroin. However mild *qaat* may be as a drug, its continuous consumption results in effects similar to those of taking other drugs. Farah’s novel *Links* (2003) refers to *Qaat* chewers as having bloodshot and sore eyes (77) echoing the stupefied state that Dallaire describes as the effect of other drugs. In *Knots* Cambara understands these effects. She is revolted by the chewing, disdainful of the consumers, and at one point she confronts youths chewing *qaat* and forcefully takes away their bundles of the drug (96-97). This is a rather daring and drastic measure which cannot immediately solve the problem but the prevalence of *qaat*-chewing shows her that she will have to do more—offer alternatives—in order to de-intoxicate the youths as part of her rehabilitation efforts.

With the sort of indoctrination that the children undergo it is never easy for the children to leave soldiering; indeed some who are taken away from war escape back to war because they cannot cope with the type of order needed when out of the soldiering. That is why in *Knots* Cambara has to deal with every aspect of the children’s life in soldiering and offer a blow by blow alternative. In *Knots*, cambara redirects the youths’ minds by giving her escorts work such as mopping Zaak’s house. She sends them to buy a chicken and which one of them slaughters. Whereas she prepares for them this first meal, in later meals she monitors them as they cook on their own. As we have seen, in the process of indoctrination in the war the adults are literally with the children feeding them on drugs and propaganda; to counter this, rehabilitation requires that in the initial stages the adults be present directing nearly every move of the rehabilitees and this is what Cambara does during the youths’ cleaning up and cooking at Zaak’s place. In other circumstances this may be considered domineering and patronizing but for the case of these children without this presence they can easily drift back to the war habits of drugs and violence. Later it is the same youths who clean up and prepare Cambara’s family property, after it has been reclaimed, for habitation. They man checkpoints to Cambara’s family property and whereas this may be seen as Cambara still exploiting the youths, it is equally a responsibility. Under direction from Cambara the youths slaughter a chicken at her house and they excitedly prepare a meal quite satisfied with their chores, indicating that they can be readjusted, rehabilitated and given an opportunity they can change and become nonviolent and responsible. Later SilkHair slaughters a chicken himself (378) and earlier even cooks on his own (158), things that he would not do before, indicating that Cambara’s lessons of giving him life-skills of self-reliance have succeeded. SilkHair and Gacal take initiative to do things indicating that if guided in the right way, they will be okay (343)

Children seek to be given attention, valued, and loved, and this is what Cambara accords to SilkHair and Gacal. And the best setup for this is a home and a family situation and this is what Cambara is attempting to arrange for these youths (Farah 2007: 294-296). Cambara moves into the family property as soon as it is reclaimed “to provide the semblance of a home to the two boys” (355) and on the first day at the family property, the two boys quickly feel at ease at this their new home. No wonder Cambara having somehow already adopted the two boys has thought of them as alternative family (287) fulfilling her earlier declaration that she would clothe SilkHair, “pamper him with bountiful love ... school him, and turn him into a fine boy, peace-loving, caring” (92) revealing her rather condescending attitude. At one time SilkHair even falls asleep in Cambara’s hotel room implying that he has been elevated into a child of her own. On the first day at the family property Cambara, SilkHair, Gacal, and Bile have a meal together reminiscent of a family reunion, a companionship which brings “so much fervor in the boys wish to participate” (380). Right from the beginning of meeting Bile, Cambara indicates that she wants their relationship to be intimate—on the first day she finds Bile sick and incapacitated she cleans him up and washes him. Their relationship

grows. By moving to the family property Cambara wants to provide privacy for her and Bile (355) and this bringing of Bile into the picture may be a signal that Cambara and Bile will marry and adopt SilkHair and live in Somalia, for after all this may be a way for Cambara finding herself after her estrangement with her husband. The novel’s argument is that even in a war situation one can “enjoy a moment of peace in the company of a friend” (381).

We do hope that with time SilkHair will be given a particular identity by name rather than the external attribute of being named after his hair that Cambara sees as silky. This namelessness is something that the novel gives prominence to emphasize that the child soldiers have become more or less types—for Cambara the names she gives to the youths such as LongEars, SnubNose, and TinyFeet, underline how the war machinery has robbed them of their individuality and reduced them to the roles of mere functionaries (Moolla 246). Under Cambara, SilkHair will undergo rehabilitation and since she has not at any time hinted that she will trace his family and reunite him, she will most likely adopt him to fill the void left by her own son, Dalmar. As I have suggested this seems rather selfish since it is based on her own need not on the boy’s. Cambara facilitates Gacal’s reunion with her mother, and we would expect that she attempts to do the same with SilkHair. Cambara may have reached conclusion that reuniting SilkHair with his community may be difficult, but we would have been satisfied with an attempt on her part. All her talk about pampering, and bountiful love sounds like Cambara will be doing this to fulfill her psychological needs and for fear of losing her like she lost Dalmar. It seems that it is her intention to produce a Dalmar out of SilkHair and this may be where her project will fail—she may not give room to SilkHair to be his own self.

Cambara may have overcome the initial obstacles. She is able to set in motion avenues through which she can interact with the youths in the Somali conflict. She has been able to reunite Gacal with his mother. She has begun the process of rehabilitating SilkHair. However she will still need to be focused and persevering in order to continue with her pursuits and she will continually need the assistance of the Women’s Network for Peace. Since she will most likely stay in Somalia she will need resilience to keep adjusting and readjusting into Mogadiscio’s circumstances in which leaderships of various sections of the city are rather fluid. Amidst the challenges, Cambara’s personal effort at understanding the plight of child soldiers and youths affected by the Somali conflict and rehabilitating them in *Knots* is laudable.

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