



# WardheerNews

NEWS FROM AFAR!

## An Interview with Cristina (Ubox) Ali Farah, the Author of the Novels – *Madre Piccola (Little Mother)* and *Il Comandante del Fiume (The Commander of the River)*

By WardheerNews  
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**Editor's Note:** Cristina ( Ubox) Ali Farah is a rising star among the emerging generation of Somali novelist. She is the author of several books including *Madre Piccola (Little Mother)*. Christina's novels and poetry have been published in numerous magazines such as *Nuovi Argomenti, Quaderni del 900, Pagine, Sagarana, El Ghibli, Caffè, Crocevia*, and in the anthologies *Ai confini del verso: Poesia della migrazione in italiano ("Poetry of migration in Italy")*. In 2006, Christina won the national literary competition, "Lingua Madre" ("Mother Tongue"), promoted by the Women Thoughts Studies Center. Abdelkarim Hassan conducted this interview for *WardheerNews.com*, Lidwien Kapteijns and Yasmeeen Maxamuud also contributed to the interview.

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**WardheerNews (WDN):** Cristina (Ubox) Farah, we are delighted to welcome you to *WardheerNews.com*. Before we delve into the bulk of the interview, could you please share with us a brief background history about yourself?

**Cristina (Ubox) Ali Farah:**

Thank you. It's the first time I've been interviewed by a Somali media organization and I too am really delighted. Often people ask



me for whom I write and unfortunately not many Somalis read Italian as they did before, these

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days. Nevertheless, I always have Somalis in mind when I write. A cousin of mine with whom I'd grown up, reflecting on our condition, once used the metaphor of a string of beads, suggesting that we are like a broken string, with the beads scattered far and wide. Writing is an attempt to rethread the beads and put everything back together.

So going back to my background. I was born in Italy, my mother is from Verona and at that time, my father, along with many others from Somalia, had received a grant to study abroad. There was this community of Somali students who lived nearby the University. It was a period when the majority of Somalis who were studying abroad wanted to go back to Somalia on graduating and this is what my father did. My mother and I followed him one year later. I grew up in Mogadishu and I lived there until 1991 when the civil war also broke out there. Then I lived for a couple of years in Pécs (Hungary) before moving to Italy. At the beginning of the nineties, at the outbreak of war, numerous Somalis seeking refuge came to Italy; then, they gradually left for other destinations that might offer them a better reception and the chance to lead a decent life. A lot of these early arrivals had been shocked at what they encountered: they had studied in Italian, they had Italian friends, so in a way, it was a double whammy, a dual trauma – first the war and then the lack of a safe haven.

**WDN: When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer, and what was the most challenging part of writing your book(s)?**

**Cristina:** When I set out as a writer, I had this feeling that wanting to write might be considered hugely presumptuous of me. Who are you and what do you have to talk about? Not just why do you have this ambition, but how can you be so important as to want to write?

Writing is a combination of boldness and arrogance. However, I realised that I had simply heard so many stories that I needed to put them down in writing and bring some order to them. Having worked hard on weaving together all these strands, which can be a painful process at times, tying everything together – it's a beautiful transformation when everything slots into place.

I always tell a story about how I started writing (again). My son had only been born a few days when I left Mogadishu in January 1991. I had a safety pillow that was sent to me from Italy and I wrapped myself in a large black veil that my sister-in-law had sent me from Saudi Arabia. For a moment I thought I would never be back and so I took my last diary, one of the notebooks I had been writing in with so much dedication over countless years. Pillow, veil and diary: these three objects have for many years been symbols of that flight, of that break between life before and life after the conflict. They were the witness of a writing practice that was then interrupted for many years, seven I think, until the journey to Zeist, in the Utrecht region, where I went to visit my father and many other relatives. I can say that this trip was like my homecoming, to a moving home, my *Guri*. I thought: this is what I want to write about.

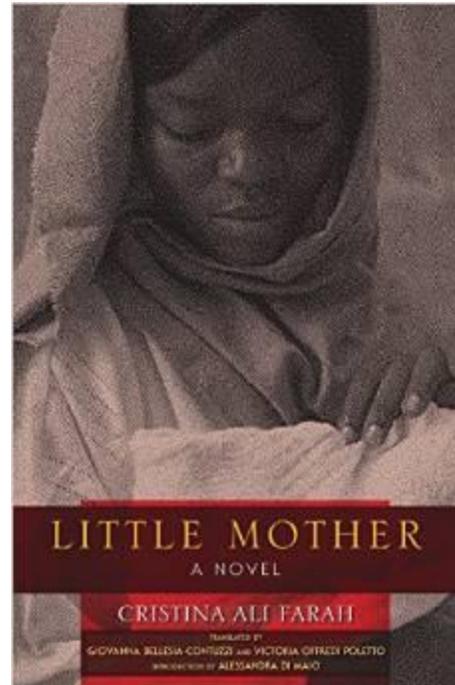
Diaspora is the terrain of my writing, and diaspora characters carry inside them this break, a gap between before and after, a frontier enclosing something very precious, a secret, a detail, a root...

**WDN: Would you share with us which authors have inspired you?**

**Cristina:** I still remember when I first listened to Nuruddin Farah at a conference in Rome. At the time I was still a student and I didn't know anything about postcolonial writers, let alone Somali writers. So I started devouring his novels, I read them all, and from then on I read all the African writers that were available in Italy: Chinua Achebe, Bessie Head, Wole Soyinka, Zoë Wicomb, Ousmane Sembène, Pepetela and so on. It was an important starting point, a way of re-thinking our collective stories putting them into a wider context.

**WDN: *Little Mother* was first published in Italian in 2007 and is now available in English translation from Indiana University Press.\* Can you tell readers who have not read your novel the story behind its title?**

**Cristina:** The title *Little Mother* was inspired by the Somali term *Habaryar*, the maternal aunt. Motherhood is an important theme of the novel. From a personal point of view it's true that motherhood has been a pivotal experience in my life. However, what I wanted to convey here is that in our society of extended families motherhood is not just a biological link, but also a social one. In the household, mothers share with other women the responsibility for and care of their children.



It is not a coincidence that one of the main characters of the novel, Barni, is a midwife but not a mother. Not only does she help women giving birth, it's also thanks to her that her cousin (and one of the novel's minor characters, the Mute) regains the ability to talk.

Talking of which, I must say that I didn't learn Somali from my father but from my young aunt Xamsa, my beloved Eeddo.

**WDN: *Little Mother* sheds light on the issues of exile and the plight of refugees coming out of Mogadishu as a result of the civil war, as evidenced by the characters *Barni* and *Domenica-Axad*. Can you share with us how you chose or developed these characters, how they relate to your own experience and to that of innumerable other Somalis? How did you approach the divisive nature of this topic among Somalis?**

**Cristina:** I reckon that every novel is a quest, an attempt made to answer a question. Nuruddin Farah asks in his non-fictional book, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, “*Still I must ask what becomes of a man or a woman if no moth taps at the window to the universe of his or her creativity?*” (which is quoted at the beginning of the novel). In other words what happens when you get displaced and you lose all your references, your family, your friends, your city, all your given understanding of your surroundings?

I have reflected on it long and hard and I came up with the belief that the thing that really anchors you to a place is the relationships that you have. Wherever you are, if you manage to keep these bonds and feelings alive – if they’re thriving, you can be anywhere. It’s the relationships that define us. Basically, I feel at home when these bonds are solid and still in place.

**WDN:** *Little Mother* also talks about the social and personal experience of children with a biracial and bi-cultural identity. Here you appear to draw on your own experience. What did you want to bring out most of all with your Italian-Somali character Domenica-Axad?

**Cristina:** I’ve also a double name as Domenica-Axado has. When I was born, my mother named me Cristina and in a Muslim country like Somalia, Cristina is just improper, not to mention that as a word, it is impossible to pronounce. But there it is, that’s my name. Once I’d arrived in Somalia, my grandmother took to calling me Ubox, which means ‘flower’ in Somali, as apparently I loved flowers. That’s the story of my names and I must say I love both of them.

As far as I can tell, reflecting on the two cultures – Italian and Somali – this bilingual vision, this concept of two radically diverse cultures, was for me, born in a family household with its everyday life and intimate moments, something I did right from the beginning. As I grew up, working on trying to reconcile things and mediate the two, I asked myself and others questions constantly. In the end, I realized that the cultural answers to these questions are striking for their similarity. When you are little, you see things with different labels, but growing up you tend to realize they have much in common nevertheless.

**WDN:** *Little Mother* depicts men as unable or unwilling to fulfill their role as husbands and also as not coping well with the experience of exile and its new cultures. However, the novel does so with humor and quite a bit of sympathy. Can you comment on the novel’s take on the male refugees propelled from Mogadishu by the events of 1991?

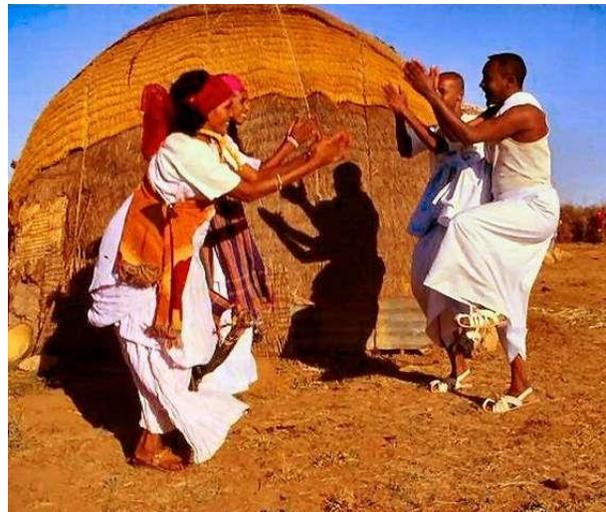
**Cristina:** I think that in the context of the diaspora, women remain more anchored to the earth, thanks to their daily routines and to their more intimate interaction with the society around them. Often it is more difficult for the men: they feel disempowered and disoriented, mere empty shells. Somali women are usually very strong and men find themselves compelled to reconsider their position in society and the relationships with their partners.

**WDN:** Your writing demonstrates keen insight into storytelling and as well Somali literature, particularly poets. Can you tell us about your journey with your love of poets? You open *Little Mother* with the poem “[Soomaali baan ahay](#)” Can you comment on why you chose this poem to begin your story?

**Cristina:** My formal education had been in Italian and on arrival in Italy, I yearned for songs, texts or any form of printed material from Somalia. This is amusing, thinking about it: up to then, when I was out and about I would speak Somali, but the printed word, the books I would read, were in Italian. I enjoy making use of Somali songs, fables and tales in my work. Fables in particular are a looking glass through which we can interpret and understand our reality.

Moreover, for the last few years I have worked in the Archivio Somalia, the objective of which is to digitize and make available online different kinds of documentation (written texts, magazines, posters, signs, photographs, conversations, plays, radio dramatizations, videos, musical pieces) stored at the Center for Somali Studies at the University of Roma Tre. This gave me access to a vast quantity of material.

“Soomaali baan ahay” was composed by Adbulkadir Hersi Yamyam (1946-2005) in the years immediately after independence. It refers therefore to a particular historical moment in which “I am Somali” meant “I am proud of who I am” and above all, “I am free.” In the novel the prelude is a chapter dedicated to the childhood of the main characters, the golden era of their lives, but also of newly independent Somalia.



**WDN:** You have recently published a second book, *Il Comandante del Fiume*, dedicated to your son Harun and it appears to be focusing on his generation of Somalis born outside of Somalia. Such a generation of children who did experience the civil war themselves but grew up with parents and relatives who did, is sometimes called “the post-generation,” a generation with its own challenges and opportunities. As many of us will have to wait for the English or Somali translation, what can you tell us about this novel?

**Cristina:** The *Commander of the River* is based on a Somali legend about the creation of two rivers, the Juba and the Webi Shebelle, which are the two main waterways in Somalia. In the legend, two wise elders leave their village in search of water, which is totally lacking. After days on foot they come to a spring. First they quench their thirst and then proceed to dig two channels in the ground, directing the water back towards the village. On their return, the villagers are delighted and celebrate the elders’ homecoming. However, before long they notice that there are

crocodiles in the river. This is a mystery for the elders: the water was clean at the spring so how has it become infested with crocodiles? In the end, they realise that the helper who had accompanied them on the journey, whose name was Shirre, Stinker, had washed himself in the spring water, and so doing, had released all his fleas into the water. Flowing downstream the fleas had gradually got bigger and bigger, eventually turning into crocodiles. In the end, one of the villagers steps forwards and begs the others to nominate him “commander of the river” and entrust him with smoothing out the problems with the crocodiles. Given that they cannot survive without the water, they have no option but to co-exist with the beasts.

The legend is successively revealed, piece by piece throughout the book, as it is told to Yabar, the young protagonist. He is 18 at the time and finds himself hospitalised having suffered an injury, the origins of which are not disclosed to the reader. He grew up in Rome, but his parents are Somalis. A major feature in his life is the absence of his father whom Yabar has never met and of whose whereabouts he has no idea. During this journey of discovery, Yabar learns to tell this story and to grasp it clearly. It’s only by telling your own story that you gain a clear idea of your true identity: what you’ve been through and who you are as a result.

**WDN:** This last novel came out only in 2014, so it may be too early to ask, but is there another novel in the pipeline?

**Cristina:** I would like to set my next novel during the Italian colonial era in Mogadishu, I think it would be interesting, having access to both the perspectives.

**WDN:** Is there any chance your two novels might be translated into Somali in the near future?

**Cristina:** I remember my father and his fellows talking about how my writing could be translated into Somali when my first short stories were published. It was hilarious listening to them, because Somali is such a rich and beautiful language and yet a literary translation from Italian didn’t make sense. I’d love to be read by Somalis in any language and I hope to write directly in Somali from time to time which is a dream of mine.

**WDN:** Thank you so much Cristina for your time.

**Cristina:** Thank you Adelarim for the opportunity.