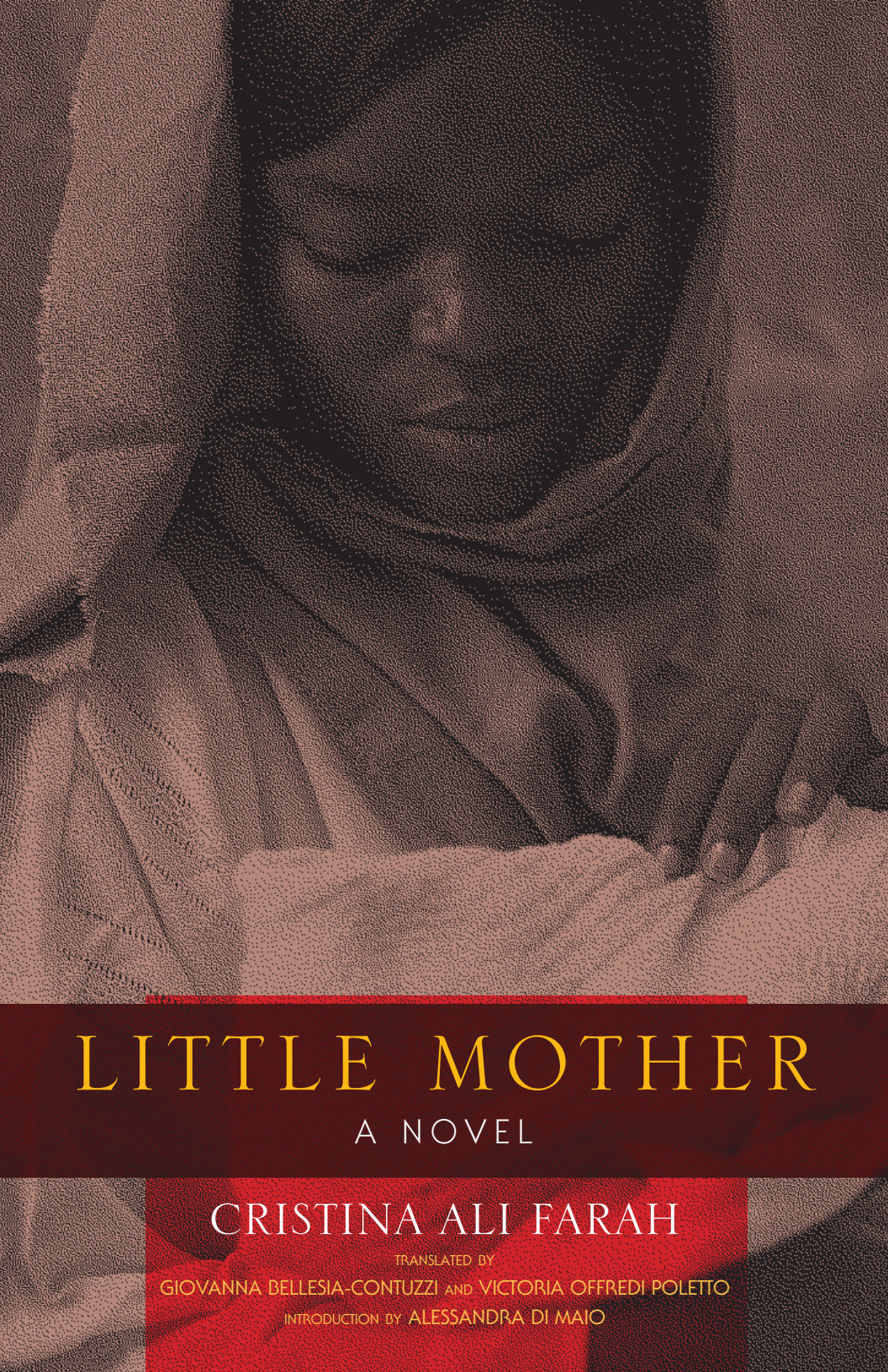

# LITTLE MOTHER

A NOVEL

CRISTINA ALI FARAH

TRANSLATED BY
GIOVANNA BELLESIA-CONTUZZI AND VICTORIA OFFREDI POLETTO

INTRODUCTION BY ALESSANDRA DI MAIO

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# CONTENTS

TRANSLATORS' PREFACE xi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xiii
INTRODUCTION xv
LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS xxv

1
Prelude—Domenica Axad
1

2
Barni
12

3
Taageere
51

4
Axad
86

5
Interlude—Taageere
120

6
Barni
128

7
Taageere
161

8
Domenica
193

9
Epilogue—Barni
224

GLOSSARY 231

# INTRODUCTION: PEARLS IN MOTION

"We are a necklace that broke off whose pearls have been scattered all over the world." This is the image that Somali-Italian author Cristina Ali Farah often uses to describe the Somali diaspora, which is the implicit protagonist of *Little Mother,* her first novel, originally published in Italian in 2007.

Cristina Ali Farah is an offspring of the very same Somali diaspora that plays a central role in all her works—fiction, poetry, theatre, and journalism. Born in 1973 in Verona, Italy, to an Italian mother and a Somali father, she was raised in Mogadishu, where her family moved when she was still an infant. Her parents met when her father was studying in Verona, her mother's hometown. In those years, students who attended the Somali National University were allowed, and often encouraged, to spend one or more terms at an Italian university. But why Italy?

Today, not everyone remembers that Somalia—or rather its coastal southern region, whose economy has traditionally revolved around the capital, Mogadishu—was once an Italian colony. This was the case from the end of the nineteenth century, when Italy embarked on its colonial enterprise in Africa, until the post–World War II Paris Peace Treaties in 1947, according to which Italy, having lost the war, was to renounce its African territories. However, after a two-year

spell during which it remained under British administration, Italian Somaliland became a United Nations Trust Territory under Italian administration from 1949 to 1959. Britain, which had in the meantime won the war, was the other major colonial power ruling the Horn of Africa, together with France, which controlled Djibouti. Italy's role was to help make the country's passage from a colonial to an independent nation as smooth as possible.

On July 1, 1960, Italian Somaliland combined with British Somaliland, and together they became the independent Republic of Somalia. Aden Abdullah Osman Daar was elected president and led the country until 1967. That year, when his former prime minister, Ali Shermarke, was elected to succeed him, he made history as one of the first leaders in Africa to peacefully hand over power to a democratically elected successor. But democracy in Somalia was short-lived. In October 1969, Ali Shermarke was murdered. Only a few days later, Major General Muhammad Siad Barre, who at the time commanded the army, led the coup d'état that would assure him absolute power for twenty-one years. In 1991, his regime was overthrown and a disastrous civil war broke out. Fighting still rages, despite several international peacekeeping operations.

Somalia is currently not recognized as a sovereign state by the international community. Having produced over a million refugees, the civil war is the product of a complex political process which needs to be considered in its entirety if one wishes to comprehend the contemporary political situation in Somalia. Prominent Somali writer Nuruddin Farah explains in an important work of nonfiction, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora,* that, unlike what the mass media seem to suggest, the civil war cannot be explained merely on the basis of tribal violence and warlordism, nor exclusively by referencing clanism. Rather, it is the ultimate result of a historical process which began with Europe's prolonged colonization, continued with a brief independence, and was followed by Siad Barre's oppressive regime (which received backing from powerful players in the international

arena) until its eventual downfall. In other words, the Somali civil war, like other civil wars in Africa, epitomizes the collapse of the postcolonial model. After decades of colonial oppression, independent Somalia has experienced increasing levels of economic and political devastation. Periods of unprecedented drought and famine have only exacerbated its precarious state of affairs. More recently, the country has experienced a turn toward fundamentalist Islam, and today it appears in the news predominantly as an alleged Al-Qaeda safe haven or because of its befuddling stories of piracy. The Transitional Federal Government, on the one hand, and the Islamic courts, on the other, fight constantly over national control. What is of even greater significance, particularly in the context of the novel *Little Mother,* is the fact that there are currently more Somalis living abroad than in Somalia itself.

Cristina Ali Farah is one of them, one of those "pearls" that the Somali civil war has scattered across the world. Her life story contains in a nutshell the complex history of the country in which she grew up. The firstborn daughter of a father from formerly Italian-colonized Somalia and a mother from the former colonizing power (a reversal of the typical colonial white man–black woman liaison), she is a genuine "postcolonial child" who has always made an effort in her life and art to combine her two native cultures into one common home. After spending her childhood and youth in Mogadishu, in 1991, when the political situation was disintegrating rapidly, she joined the large number of compatriots who were fleeing the country. Her escape as an eighteen-year-old woman carrying her newborn baby is lyrically evoked in one of her first poems, "Red", "Foamy dawn, you stole upon us, alone in the obscurity, as we were leaving forever. / Me, in the dirty little truck, with a precious bundle in my arms. / I stared, stunned, at the rifles resting on shoulders. Somali rebels accompanied our farewell." Since then, Ali Farah has never returned to Somalia. She first moved to Pécs, in Hungary, where she spent the first two years of her exile; then she tried, unsuccessfully, to settle in Verona, the town of her birth. Finally she moved to Rome, the former

colonial metropole recently turned into a hub for global migrants, where she has lived since 1997.

In Rome, while studying for a university degree in literature, she soon became a professional writer. In *Little Mother,* like in the majority of her works, Italy's capital city occupies a privileged space. Cristina Ali Farah's alternative, poetic map of the "eternal city" includes historic landmarks as well as ethnic neighborhoods, the monumental capital complex where state funerals are celebrated, the Somali and Chinese shops all around Termini railway station, the abandoned Somali embassy with the elegant villas and palaces surrounding it, botanic gardens, hospitals, private residences, markets, and subway stations where the faces and voices of an increasingly multiethnic twenty-first-century humanity encounter each other on a daily basis.

Cristina Ali Farah writes in Italian, one of her two native tongues—that of education and of formal schooling, and of her literary studies. In Somalia, Italian was the main language of instruction in the colonial system and remained so for many years after decolonization, even after Somali (until then an oral language) was finally transcribed in 1972. Until not long ago, Italian was also the language spoken by the Somali elite, by the "been-tos" like her own father, by the "proper gentlemen" who would linger around the Italian Cultural Center in Mogadishu and elegantly drop one or two Italian words into their conversation as "classy men" were expected to do. Taageere, one of the novel's protagonists, describes this phenomenon. In today's Somalia, however, Italian remains only as the old colonial language spoken by a dying generation, and is largely ignored by young people.

Cristina Ali Farah's use of the Italian language in her prose is remarkable: in this novel, as well as in her multi-award-winning short stories, such as "Punt Rap," "Entirely," and the novel's namesake "Little Mother," she dominates, transforms, and enriches the language imposed by the former colonizer by bending it to her own cultural and artistic needs, thereby effectively inverting the original colonial power relations. Thus, language becomes not only the cho-

sen terrain for significant creative interventions but also, ultimately, a site of resistance. In *Little Mother* we find the tongue of the former colonizer transformed into the language of postcoloniality through creative manipulation and *métissage*—or, more accurately, *meticciato,* in Italian. An example is offered by the recurring interspersion of some Somali terms in the original Italian text referring to concepts and objects specific to Somali culture: *abbayo,* an endearing term for a close girlfriend or sister; *catar,* an oriental perfume; *jinni,* a demon; *fasakh,* the annulment of a marriage according to Islamic law; *iid,* a religious holiday; and many others. Moreover, some of these Somali terms—faithfully left in the original by the translators, who for an explanation refer the reader to the novel's glossary—are words with Italian origins that entered the Somali language during the colonial domination, such as *barbaroni* (from Italian *peperoni,* bell peppers), *fasoleeti* (from *fazzoletto,* handkerchief), *farmashiiyo* (from *farmacia,* pharmacy), *kabushiini* (from *cappuccino*), and *draddorio* (from *trattoria*). Cristina Ali Farah's use of these expressions in the text is a successful attempt to confound and possibly overturn the interior workings of the relationship between language and power. Even the title of the novel testifies to the author's artistic intent, making it manifest: the idiom "little mother" (*madre piccola,* in the original Italian title) is a loan translation of the Somali *habaryar,* the term for an aunt on the maternal side.

The novel, however, accommodates more than Somali, including as it does the various languages and voices of the diaspora's protagonists that Cristina Ali Farah portrays. Set in the present—the action, which is nonchronologically ordered, spans the period from the late seventies to around 2004—*Little Mother* is about the friendship between two cousins, Barni and the *mulatta* Domenica Axad, whose mother is Italian. The two girls grow up together in Mogadishu, once a cosmopolitan pearl on the Indian Ocean, and are torn apart by the war, eventually reuniting in Italy as adults. In Rome, Barni, who works as a midwife, helps Domenica Axad have her baby, to whom she is a "little mother." The baby's father,

Taageere, is an old, long-lost acquaintance from childhood whom Domenica Axad, after meandering for ten years, eventually meets in one of the diaspora's multiple sites, a unidentified North American city (Toronto, in an earlier version of the novel, the metropolitan center with the largest Somali population in North America). In the projects outside of this city, where Somalis live side by side with Ghanaians, Jamaicans, and other communities from the black diaspora, Domenica Axad is filming parts of a documentary on the daily life of Somali refugees. Her partner on this project is a friend she met in Germany, Saciid Saleebaan, who turns out to be one of Taageere's old buddies from Mogadishu. Taageere's first-person story alternates with those of the two cousins in the novel. The three narrating protagonists—Domenica Axad, Barni, and Taageere—alternately take the stage, three times each for a total of nine chapters—nine is a recurring, symbolic number in the text. Contrapuntally, each of them gives an intensely lyrical monologue, Domenica Axad nostalgically reminiscing about her childhood in the prelude, Taageere commemorating Mogadishu in the interlude, and Barni wishing for a happier future in the epilogue. On two separate occasions they converse with different interlocutors, who appear only in absentia in the novel but who, because of their ambiguous presence and inquiring spirit, help the reader to appreciate different facets of the protagonists' personalities and to collate bits and pieces of their private histories.

By interlacing the broken threads of their narratives, moving back and forth in time, the three main characters recreate their interwoven personal stories and those of their shattered, displaced community. The metaphor of the diaspora as a tangled net that is to be unraveled and stitched back up recurs through the novel. Moreover, they offer themselves as resonating chambers, amplifying a variety of additional voices, most poignantly those of some of the best-known contemporary Somali poets and singers—Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad, Maxamuud Cabdullahi Ciise, and Axmed Naaji—whose evocative verses blend in with the protago-

nists' monologues. In particular, the finale of the interlude, when Taageere's voice duets with that of Axmed Naaji in the heartbreaking mourning for beautiful Xamar (a local name for Mogadishu), constitutes one of the most lyrical, melancholic passages of the novel.

A considerable number of secondary characters also move in the background, materializing and then disappearing with equal ease. They are all linked through different circumstances to at least one of the protagonists, and often to all three—Shukri, Taageere's former wife, "as sweet as sugar"; his beloved friend Xirsi, who dies in his arms in Mogadishu; his younger sister Luul escaping war, finally landing on the little Italian island of Lampedusa; their uncle and aunt Diriiye and Safiya in Rome; Maxamed X, the "mute," and his mates occupying what once was the Somali embassy in Rome; Barni and Domenica Axad's parents; their first cousins Libeen and Shamsa; their much-loved, older uncle Foodcadde; Ardo, Barni's friend whose filigree earrings and "earth" name remind her of her own late mother; Ayaan, "the wild one, an armored leopard" whom Domenica Axad befriends in Holland; Maryam, "slightly touched in the head," because, Taageere explains, "people who are in exile for a long time end up going mad"; the already mentioned Saciid Saleebaan, who "acts like an American," calling his Somali compatriots "brothers and sisters," in English, and addressing them as "ladies and gentlemen"; and a significant number of children, among them newborn Taariikh, Domenica Axad and Taageere's son, named after his maternal grandfather. Dislocated in parts of the world as different as the Netherlands, Finland, Kenya, Australia, and of course North America and Italy, these minor characters, whose abundant presence might occasionally challenge the readers' attention and lead them temporarily off-track, represent the individual strings that, all together, constitute the web of the Somali diaspora. As it so happens, the more we proceed into the story, the more we realize that their role is not minor but in fact pivotal to the development of the plot. Their life stories are strictly associated with those of the

three main protagonists, with whom they share a history of trauma, exile, nostalgia, a desire to keep their country alive through collective memory, and, in most cases, hope for a better future.

The result is a choral, self-questioning (interrogative clauses abound in the text), fractured yet accomplished narrative offering a compelling portrait of Somalia and its diaspora, whose structure it reflects. The author's intention is to recompose the fragments of a nation through the eyes and voices of a younger generation whose experience of that nation has been mainly its collapse, and for whom "home" has mostly been a vexed concept. The search, in this novel, cannot be conducted individually. Somalia's national identity has been torn apart and it takes an entire dispersed community to knit the threads back and overcome family and clan hostilities (in this sense, the story of the friendship between Barni and Ardo, from a rival clan, appears emblematic). Similarly, the three protagonists of this novel need each other in order to find themselves and their place—their paths, rather—in the world. However, individual identity remains difficult to figure out, and throughout the story remains a work in progress. This is true especially for Taageere, because, this story seems to suggest, men have an extremely hard time finding a new place for themselves in the diaspora, while women emerge as the bedrock of the community. Again, power roles appear inverted in this novel. Women assume all kinds of responsibilities. While Taageere struggles to define his role as a husband, father, son, friend, and devout Muslim, Barni and Domenica Axad, whose mothers already paved the way for equality between the sexes, propose an alternative model of family that can do without the physical presence of a father. In the diaspora, a mother and a "little mother" can, and indeed often must, join forces to raise a child together. In conclusion, the final message of the novel is an optimistic one: despite chaos, uprootedness, disempowerment, and a sense of general demise, birth remains possible, and reconnections are not only plausible, but vital.

Cristina Ali Farah's novel swells the ranks of Somali literature—a literature singularly characterized by the fact that, perhaps more than many other national literature, it is written in the multiple languages of the diaspora. Suffice it to mention, for instance, Nuruddin Farah, Somalia's literary patriarch, who writes in English; Abdourahman A. Waberi from Djibouti, writing in French; Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in Dutch; and other Somali-Italian writers, such as Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and Igiaba Scego. These authors' works offer an important contribution to African literature and to the cultures of the African diaspora worldwide. Cristina Ali Farah's *Little Mother* adds to this legacy by contributing to an alternative remapping of the diaspora which incorporates Italy as one of its fundamental, albeit often overlooked, territories. By offering a portrait of the contemporary Somali world as it is perceived by the younger generation, *Little Mother* points to a world in which national borders appear increasingly blurred and problematic, where old identities are constantly renegotiated in the process of crossing, and new, yet inscrutable ones come to birth. It is the world of the contemporary, global African diaspora, where individuals and communities must learn to share space and live side by side. For this reason, it appears particularly appropriate that Cristina Ali Farah's first novel finds its home in the English-speaking world in this new, important, aptly named literary series, *Global African Voices.*

Alessandra DiMaio