

THE ITALIAN COLONIAL HERITAGE IN THE NARRATIVES OF SECOND-GENERATION AFRICAN-ITALIAN AUTHORS

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- **ABSTRACT:** Italy's late involvement in Africa's colonization did not make its colonialism less insidious and impactful than that practiced by other European countries. Despite long-held opinions that depict the Italian case as less harmful and hostile, Italy colonized Eritrea, Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia through violent movements and aggression. Nevertheless, Italy's inability to properly address the colonial past left the country unprepared to confront the postcolonial present. As a consequence of the missed debate on colonialism, the relationship between Italians and first and second-generation migrants is characterized by an ambiguous *modo coloniale di relazionarsi*. This essay analyzes how the *relazione ambigua* generated by the colonial past manifests itself in issues related to citizenship, identity, and gender in contemporary Italy, as well as their representations in Italian postcolonial cultural production by second-generation African-Italian authors.
- **KEYWORDS:** Postcolonial Literature; Italian Literature; Identity.

Postcolonial Italian literature

Despite the long-held contact with the African continent since the 19th century due to colonization, migration to Italy has become a concern to the Italian government from the late 1970s, ignoring “that at least some of the guests of today were the hosts of yesterday” (Curti, 2007, p. 60). Contemporary cultural production offers alternative narratives of history and national identity in response to the government's failure to recognize the country's demographic and cultural transformations in a postcolonial reality. In fact, literary production promotes debates around the *relazione ambigua*, a feature of the relationship between Italians and first and second-generation migrants based on manifestations of the colonial legacy, such as racism and social exclusion. Specifically, literature produced by second-generation writers supplies “alternative genealogies of history, memory, and national belonging” (Clò, 2010, p. 27) and generates a dialogic gaze

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over colonialism and its legacy from the point of view of the colonized. This production contests the “Italian exceptionalism” (Hawthorne, 2017, p. 164) narrative used to deny the existence of the *modo coloniale di relazionarsi* today and offers new narratives that allow the recovery of a forgotten history under the structural racism and prejudice in contemporary Italy. Consequently, postcolonial Italian literature narrates Italian history by re-discussing the encounter between cultures produced at first by colonialism and then by migration, thus offering a change of viewpoint that exposes the unacknowledged reality of colonialism.

Postcolonial Italian literature is related to the experience of migration and marginalization within Italian society, and it focuses on unaddressed questions of the Italian colonial past and on how this legacy informs and constructs the colonial way of addressing the “other”, especially the black body, in contemporaneity. These polysemous and interdisciplinary texts narrate Italian history through the re-discussion of the encounter between cultures produced firstly by colonialism and, in a later period, by migration. The importance of postcolonial literary production is not related to the simple discussion of historical facts, as by broadening the historical debate on Italian colonialism, postcolonial authors reveal the persistence and reactivation of the system of colonial relations in contemporaneity. Besides participating in the process of historical revisiting, these writers have contributed to bringing the two cultures (Italian and African) into relation, placing themselves as cultural intermediaries between the two worlds. In fact, one of the main accomplishments of contemporary Italian cultural production is exposing the previously unacknowledged reality of colonialism to the Italian public in their own language, revealing “the inextricable bundle of duplicities and sorrows which marked individual lives across the colonial divide” (Triulzi, 2012, p. 108). Thus, in several Italian postcolonial literary texts, storytelling, an artifice that positions the readers within the narrative and facilitates the process of identification (Clò, 2010, p. 35), is used by the authors to promote the critical recovery of the history of the Italian colonial enterprise in the colonized countries, which is narrated by the colonized body, giving voice to the subjectivities that accompanied the violence and traumas suffered along the colonized past.

The texts of second-generation African-Italian authors are fundamental to the representation of the ambiguous colonial relationship in the country, as they explore the persistent colonial stereotypes in the Italian collective imaginary. Gabriella Ghermandi (Italian-Ethiopian), Djarah Kan (Italian-Ghanaian), Cristina Ali Farah, and Igiaba Scego (both Italian-Somali) use cultural production as their primary tool to discuss the multiple manifestations of the colonial *relazione ambigua* in contemporary Italy, as the themes of citizenship, the intersection between blackness and *italianità* and the relationship between social and gender discrimination are constantly present in their literary productions.

Italiani, brava gente?

The persistence of the colonial past, which manifests itself in different aspects of the Italian *modo coloniale di relazionarsi*, in contemporary Italy is mainly caused by the

lack of confrontation with the colonial past. Since the loss of its colonial possessions after the Second World War, the country avoided assessing colonialism's consequences, thus affecting the contemporary perception of migration and the complicated relationship between Italians and the "other". The Italian relationship with the colonial past is marked by a "postcolonial unconscious" (Ponzanesi, 2004, p. 26), a disregard for colonialism and its legacy, supported by the myth of the *Italiani, brava gente*, which affirms that Italians practiced "a more 'gentle' form of colonialism in Africa" (Hawthorne, 2017, p. 154), concealing the racial laws, *il madamismo*, and the use of poison gas in the continent. The undiscussed atrocities manifest themselves in the present as the "lived experience of the black" (Hawthorne, 2017, p. 154) in Italy, characterized by discrimination, negative stereotyping, and aggression that often result in the loss of migrant lives. In this context, postcolonial literary production is essential to replace the missed decolonization process in Italian culture and society, showing that "*il colonialismo italiano è stato tremendo*" (Comberiati, 2009, p. 146). Ultimately, postcolonial Italian writers not only represent the influence of the non-discussed colonial past in today's *relazione ambigua* but also offer counter-discourses that enable the rewriting of history from their point of view, commonly based on the oral accounts of witnesses of the time.

The survival of the "*noi vi abbiamo fatto le strade, noi vi abbiamo fatto le scuole*" (Comberiati, 2009, p. 146) narrative in the national collective imagery, associated with a version of the Italian colonization as a civilizing mission, is used to address migrants from former colonies in contemporary Italy and to affirm that Italy is not a racist country. Nevertheless, this narrative is ultimately contested in *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007), a novel that "re-reads the colonial legacy from a diasporic perspective" (Lombardi-Diop, 2020, p. 71). In Gabriella Ghermandi's novel, which is based on the stories of the Italian colonization provided by her and other Ethiopian families, the young Malhet receives the task of acting as the *cantora* of the colonial past "*per non dare agli italiani la possibilità di scordare*" (Ghermandi, 2021, p. 57). Throughout the novel, the protagonist's narrative disowns the never-properly re-assessed history developed by imperial Italy, as it is accompanied by a "plurality of narrating voices" (Vivan, 2011, p. 125) that are used as a tool to "shed light on events and periods in Ethiopia's past and build up a counter-history" (Vivan, 2011, p. 125). The importance of narrating the colonial past is also asserted when Malhet is studying in Bologna:

In Italia sono convinti di essere passati di qui in gita turistica e di avere abbellito e ammodernato il nostro pidocchioso paese con strade, case, scuole. Non sai quante volte me lo sono sentito dire [...] Non ho mai risposto perché non sapevo come obiettare, ma oggi so cosa direi. Tutto ciò che hanno costruito lo abbiamo pagato. Anzi, abbiamo pagato anche le costruzioni dei prossimi tre secoli. Con tutti quelli che hanno ammazzato, ne avrebbero di danni da pagare [...]. È passato, ma non tanto da non riparlarne. Bisognerebbe dargli la nostra versione dei fatti. (Ghermandi, 2021, p. 237).

After being confronted several times with the myth of the *Italiani, brava gente*, Malhet realizes that Italians are not aware of their colonial past and that a new elaboration

of the facts is necessary. In Ghermandi's text, the need for a political and cultural confrontation between former colonizers and colonized in contemporary Italy perceived by the protagonist provokes "la nascita dalla volontà di esprimere il proprio punto di vista e una testimonianza incrociata dei fatti storici" (Luraschi, 2009, p. 188). As the novel progresses, Mahlet becomes responsible for establishing the historical truth and enacting new forms of transnational identity and identification.

In *Regina di fiori e di perle*, the colonial past's rediscovery from the colonized's perspective is accompanied by the production of a new counter-discourse based on political awareness. Ghermandi's narrative is built on the premise that, although European colonialism was a phenomenon that occurred outside the continent's borders, it remains a fundamentally European phenomenon, and its consequences not only profoundly influenced the political, economic, and social history of the former colonies but also perform a lasting impact on the new configurations of contemporary Europe. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the fundamental role of the continuity between European colonial history and the postcolonial condition brought about by transnational migrations in contemporary Italy and Europe.

In the novel's last section, the narration's time is brought back to the present of writing, as Mahlet addresses the readers to remind them that Ethiopia's history is also their history: "Ed è per questo che oggi vi racconto la sua storia. Che poi è anche la mia. Ma pure la vostra" (Ghermandi, 2021, p. 299), thus connecting the Italian colonial past and the postcolonial present. This strategy urges Italians to know their own history, even when it took place beyond national borders, and enables them to perceive the existence of a past that still influences the present. Mahlet, as the *cantora* of the colonial past, recasts Italian history in a transnational framework, arguing for the need to understand colonialism and its consequences as a tool for building a more just relationship between Italians and Ethiopians.

Furthermore, confrontations with the forgotten Italian colonialist past are also depicted in Djarah Kan's (2020) short story "Conosci la tua storia" in *Ladri di denti*, which reveals Italy's forgotten colonial past and the continued violence it perpetuates in the postcolonial scenario. According to Kan, the Indro Montanelli statue in Milan, for instance, should be criticized as a symbol of Italy's colonial history and its impact on Africa, and not regarded as a commemoration. Despite the two attempts manifesting against the statue in 2019 and 2020, Italians remain unwilling to confront the legacy of the country's colonialism in the African continent, as the collective imagery perpetrates the myth that Italians were good colonizers:

Italians care little or nothing about coming to terms with what to this day is described as a clumsy attempt to get a little piece of Africa. The collective Italian subconscious is unable to hold in its hands the weight of what occurred in Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia in the early 20th century and during the Fascist era. It's difficult to let go of the idea that after all they are not "good people". (Kan; Romeo; Fabbri, 2022, p. 594).

At the same time, Kan asserts that ignoring this history “*fa male perché ci rende meno umani di quanto invece vorremmo essere*” (Kan, 2020, p. 80) and that recognizing the colonial past is a political act part of the “*guarigione dolorosa*” (Kan, 2020, p. 81), a process necessary for understanding the lasting effects of colonialism in the contemporary scenario.

Postcolonial Italian writers, such as Ghermandi and Kan, are rewriting history and revealing the correct version of the facts, thus contributing to the configuration of future social and cultural scenarios. *Regina di fiori e di perle* and *Ladri di denti* contribute not only to reassessing Italian history and culture by listening to new subjects and representing new voices but also to showing how “*le relazioni di dominio poste in essere dal colonialismo siano riprodotte nella società italiana contemporanea*” (Romeo, 2018, p. 2).

New forms of *italianità*

Besides the historical contextualization of the contemporary migratory phenomenon, the construction of new narratives around the colonial past proposed by postcolonial literature has enabled the rethinking of contemporary Italian identity (*italianità*) from multiple and transnational viewpoints. Since the migration flows to Italy increased significantly, the *relazione ambigua* entered the discussions on who can be considered Italian and what constitutes *italianità*. Contemporary Italy is characterized by the denial of Italian citizenship, as the legal principle for its acquisition is based on an ambiguous and racist understanding of *italianità*. Clearly, the Italian national space remains a white space in the collective imaginary “*all'interno del quale ai corpi neri non è riconosciuta un'esistenza legittima*” (Romeo, 2018, p. 82): *italianità* seems unattainable for black Italians because of their “*difformità dalla norma cromatica nazionale*” (Romeo, 2018, p. 97). Consequently, “blackness and Italianness seem incompatible and therefore mutually exclusive” (Lombardi-Diop; Romeo, 2012, p. 10), creating a problematic situation for second-generation African migrants in Italy with an identity in continual redefinition.

In this context, the production of second-generation postcolonial writers in Italy has acquired a fundamental role in the analysis of the complex systematic structures that reveal the legacy of the colonial past and in the discussion of race and color beyond “binary oppositions of black/white” (Romeo, 2012, p. 223). In a country where black bodies are “symbols of non-belonging” (Hawthorne, 2017, p. 160), postcolonial authors have the difficult task of confronting the colonial past and acquiring legitimacy for both Italians and black individuals. The theme of citizenship and the intersection between blackness and *italianità* is present in the texts of second-generation Italian writers, alongside the dissemination of new postcolonial meanings of *italianità* that can transform the traditional idea of national culture and stage Italian society in a scenario of transnational migrations. In their narratives, these writers simultaneously present hybrid characters, “creating a rupture in the Italian collective imaginary” (Clò, 2012, p. 224) and denounce contemporary Italian politics of racism that consider second-generation migrants as

racialized and colonized subjects connected to migration, denying them the right to citizenship.

The problematic situation of citizenship in contemporary Italy and the intersection between blackness and Italianness are at the center of the cultural productions by second-generation migrants in Italy, who are often considered non-Italian due to their discrepancy with the national “chromatic norm” (Romeo, 2012, p. 230) and are kept on the margins of society through an obsolete mechanism of attribution of citizenship¹. In their cultural productions, the categories of race and blackness intersect with that of citizenship, and at the center of their representations is an increasingly diversified and heterogeneous Italy. In this regard, second-generation African-Italian authors are responsible for attributing new meanings to the category of *italianità*, as they promote the dissemination of postcolonial imaginaries and identities that not only transform the idea of national culture as it has been traditionally conceived but stage the profound changes that are continuously occurring in contemporary Italian society following transnational migrations.

The theme of the second-generation’s multiple and hybrid identities and the “intergenerational conflict and the complicated confrontation with Italian institutions” (Clò, 2012, p. 278) is condensed in *Pecore Nere* (2005), a collection of short stories written by four second-generation African-Italian authors. Igiaba Scego’s *Salsicce* narrates the cultural shock experienced by the Muslim female protagonist, who, despite being an Italian citizen, is moved to prove that she is “a true Italian” by eating sausages after the officialization of the Bossi-Fini immigration law in 2002, which imposed fingerprinting for all non-EU immigrants. The law was created during Silvio Berlusconi’s government, and it made the integration of foreigners living in Italy even more difficult. The news of the creation of this anti-immigration measure revitalizes the problems of the protagonist’s hybrid identity, who decides to buy some sausages, even if, as it can be understood from the reading of the story, being a Sunni Muslim, she could not eat the sausages, as they are non-halal food. The anxiety regarding the decision to eat the *salsicce* or not is inserted in the protagonist’s internal conflict with her multiple identities, in which the sausages function as a symbol of Italianness which she feels she cannot fully attain: “Guardo l’impudico pacco e mi chiedo: ma ne vale veramente la pena? Se mi ingoio queste salsicce una per una, la gente lo capirà che sono italiana come loro? Identica a loro? O sarà stata una bravata inutile?” (Scego, 2006, p. 26).

In *Salsicce*, the protagonist is forced to confront “the difficulty of imagining herself as a black Italian” (Romeo, 2012, p. 229), as the national imaginary resists the possibility of “considering the intersection of blackness and Italianness” (Romeo, 2012, p. 229). In the reconfigured legal scenario in which authorities seem to reaffirm the traditional concept of *italianità*, the Scego wonders about her split identity:

¹ Currently, Italy has a restrictive citizenship legislation based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, by which nationality is determined by the nationality of one or both parents. Thus, the children of immigrants are considered immigrants as well, even when they are born and raised in the Italian territory.

Più somala? Più italiana? Forse ¾ somala e ¼ italiana? O forse è vero tutto il contrario? Non so rispondere! Non mi sono mai "frazionata" prima d'ora [...] Credo di essere una donna senza identità. O meglio con più identità. [...] Io mi sento tutto, ma a volte non mi sento niente. (Scego, 2006, p. 28).

Having identified the activities and habits that make her feel Italian and those that make her feel Somali, the protagonist depicts the journey she has undertaken toward the acceptance of a hybrid identity. Thus, Igiaba Scego's story uses the *salsicce* as an "emblem of integration with Italian culture" (Curti, 2007, p. 72) to represent the collective experience of a second-generation migrant in Italy and to discuss that questioning migrants' multiple identities conceals a racist legal culture based on the colonial concept of "blood purity" (Clò, 2012, p. 278) that persists in Italian citizenship law.

The centrality acquired by the experience of migration in contemporary Italy undeniably poses the problem of identity and its redefinition (Quaquarelli, 2006, p. 64). The tensions within a complex system of identities experienced by second generations of immigrants in Italy do not solely affect the migrant community, but also the process of building a multiple and postcolonial national identity for the country as a whole. In this sense, by discussing the possible meanings of "being Italian" today, postcolonial literature directly affects the notion of Italian identity and contributes to the transformation of its definition in the contemporary postcolonial context. The issue of migration and identity in the context of Italian postcolonial dynamics, for instance, is a theme of Cristina Ubi Ali Farah's literary production. In *Madre piccola* (2007), the violence over the migrant body is portrayed as a symbol of the troubled encounter with the other in Italy. Domenica Axad, suspended between two identities, starts to harm herself, an act that represents the disintegration of the migrant body that cannot find a single and stable identity after migration. She interrupts the self-harming practice only when she manages to "*riannodare i fili*" (Luraschi, 2009, p. 194), reconciling the threads of her double identity. In the diasporic experience lived by the Somali today, a consequence of the Italian colonial past, the possibility of re-establishing community ties outside the homeland acquires fundamental importance for *Madre piccola*'s protagonist, as it ensures the possibility of acquiring a fixed identity in a transnational context of nomadism and multiple forms of marginalization. In the novel, Domenica Axad's *conclusion* that self-definition is a necessary political act demonstrates how the Italian identity is being re-imagined by immigrants from former Italian colonies: the metaphor of her "*filo multiplo*" (Ali Farah, 2007, p. 17) is thus used by Ali Farah to represent the complicated condition in Italy of migrants socially and legally "suspended between not being here and not being there simultaneously" (Brioni; Bonsa Gulema, 2018, p. 16).

Women and the postcolonial condition

Narratives around black women's bodies in Italy are intertwined with the country's colonial legacy, as the colonial project that exploited African people also dehumanized

and commodified black bodies, especially females. This objectification persists in contemporary Italy, where black women are often hypersexualized and depicted as exotic objects of desire. As both female and African, these bodies are victims of systemic discrimination and racism that places them in a position of absolute otherness.

The hypersexualization of black female bodies in contemporary Italy is one of the themes of the story “*Cacciatrici di negre*”, in *Ladri di denti*. In this section of the book, Kan narrates the decision of some white women to violently chase Nigerian prostitutes away in the city of Castel Volturno. The decision was motivated by the association between black women and sexual availability and the understanding of these women as enemies to the traditional Italian domestic environment, according to a racist and sexist perspective. As Djarah Kan discusses:

That racism is an exclusively “masculine” matter is a very sexist misconception that imagines women as naturally predisposed to kindness, forgiveness, and appeasement. Nationalism, which instead considers women at the forefront in support of racial purity, often uses racist and sexist views and readings to justify hatred towards immigrants and Black people. What happens then is that white women feel threatened by Black women because, according to a racist and sexist view, they are more promiscuous and culturally backward. (Kan; Romeo; Fabbri, 2022, p. 595).

The defense of an alleged racial purity by some Italian white women reflects not only the “racist and sexist views and readings to justify hatred towards immigrants and Black people” (Kan; Romeo; Fabbri, 2022, p. 596) but also the persisting narratives about African women developed during colonialism that the postcolonial world has not yet faced and solved.

During the Italian colonial experience, African women were seen as objects to be conquered as much as Africa itself. Due to the *legge del madamismo*, African women suffered the most from Italian colonialism. According to this law, Italian men in Africa could live only without having children and marrying, which deeply affected and marginalized local women in their communities. Furthermore, women’s sexualization and objectification happened through the diffusion of photos of naked African women, which enabled the creation of narratives regarding the supposedly exoticizing sexual freedom of African women.

The Italian colonial treatment of local women’s bodies produced consequences still visible in contemporary Italy, where migrant women face ethnic and social marginalization the most. In this context, postcolonial writers denounce in their texts the effects of the colonial legacy in the *modo coloniale di relazionarsi*, which is responsible for dictating the imagery around the former colonized bodies in Italy. The dual subordination of the migrant woman is examined in detail by Cristina Ali Farah in *Madre piccola*, where, paradoxically, the female characters escape the violence of the civil war but not the oppression practiced by the communities in which they live after immigrating. In that sense, Ali Farah reveals the contradictions of the postcolonial scenario in which social violence and exclusion are “*segnali di continuità con il passato coloniale anziché il suo*

superamento” (Meschini, 2017, p. 380). Consequently, the novel’s female figures suffer a double exclusion based on ethnicity and gender. Besides suffering marginalization for being ethnically different, the female characters of *Madre piccola* also need to confront the mechanisms of gender exclusion. In her narration, therefore, Ali Farah connects the transcultural dimension to the discourse on identity and gender issues.

Nevertheless, postcolonial Italian literature not only addresses the persistence of the colonial portrait of African women in the present, but also offers counter-discourses to that negative and persistent imaginary. In *Regina di fiori e di perle*, Gabriella Ghermandi defamiliarizes stereotypes and beliefs about African women that continue to populate Italian public discourse and represents women “who are not just passive and consenting commodities but active agents of their people’s history” (Clò, 2010, p. 29). In the chapter *Storia di Jacob*, for instance, the author comments on the female role in anticolonialism, as Ethiopian women were central to the resistance against Italian colonizers. Different voices narrate the role of women in the resistance against the invaders: from the *signora della tartaruga* to the warrior Kebedech Seyoum, Gabriella Ghermandi places female protagonism at the center of Ethiopian resistance to Italian colonialism. Ultimately, Ghermandi subverts the sexualized image of African women inherited from the colonial discourse, as she creates new forms of identification that offer a response to the double marginalization suffered by black women in contemporary Italy and makes a crucial first step towards changing the legacy of colonialism regarding the Italian idea of the black female body.

Contemporary Italian postcolonial cultural production as representation and subversion of the colonial *relazione ambigua*

Contemporary Italian postcolonial cultural production is based on the assumption that even if colonialism happened outside Italy, it was still an Italian phenomenon, and its consequences influenced both the history of the former colonies and the new configurations of contemporary Italy, which became one of the leading destinations for migrants coming from former colonies. Nevertheless, postcolonial writers not only represent the continuities between the colonial and the postcolonial condition, predominantly characterized by the *relazione ambigua*, but also offer counter-narratives that enable the creation of new forms of history and transnational identification in today’s postcolonial scenario. By unveiling the colonial legacy underneath contemporary themes of citizenship, *italianità* and gender, Ghermandi, Scego, Ali Farah, and Kan initiate a process of decolonization in Italian society that could in the future mitigate the colonial *relazione ambigua* which regulates the Italian relationship with the dissimilar. The literary work of these authors revisits forgotten narrations to use the understanding of the past as the basis for adequately addressing the postcolonial context in the present. Ultimately, the comprehension of under-addressed questions of Italian colonialism enables the building of a new national memory and collective identity better suited to respond to the main urgent themes of contemporary postcolonial Italy, such as immigration and citizenship.

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- **RESUMO:** *O tardio envolvimento da Itália na colonização da África não tornou o seu colonialismo menos insidioso e impactante do que o praticado por outros países europeus. Apesar das opiniões de longa data que retratam o caso italiano como menos prejudicial e hostil, a Itália colonizou a Eritreia, a Somália, a Líbia e a Etiópia através de movimentos violentos e agressivos. No entanto, a incapacidade da Itália de abordar de forma adequada o passado colonial deixou o país despreparado para enfrentar o presente pós-colonial. Como consequência da falta de um debate sobre o colonialismo, a relação entre os italianos e os migrantes de primeira e segunda geração é caracterizada por um 'modo coloniale di relazionarsi'. Este ensaio analisa como a 'relazione ambigua' gerada pelo passado colonial se manifesta em questões relacionadas à cidadania, identidade e gênero na Itália contemporânea, bem como suas representações na produção cultural pós-colonial italiana por autores afro-italianos de segunda geração.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Literatura pós-colonial; Literatura Italiana; Identidade.*

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