

# Women and Migration

## Responses in Art and History



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# WOMEN AND MIGRATION

# Women and Migration: Responses in Art and History

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# 39. Transnational Minor Literature: Cristina Ali Farah's Somali Italian Stories

*Alessandra Di Maio*

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## Minor Transnationalism in Italy's Contemporary Letters

An emerging, multicultural literature in Italian is conventionally thought to have begun in 1990 with the publication of the first two major book-length narratives by authors originally from different regions of Africa writing in Italian: *Io, venditore di elefanti* (*I am an Elephant Seller*) by Pap Khouma from Senegal, and *Immigrato* (*Immigrant*) by Tunisian writer Salah Methnani. The following year *Chiamatemi Alì* (*Call Me Alì*) by Moroccan Mohammed Bouchane was published, and in 1993 the first book-length narrative by a woman, Nassera Chohra, originally from Algeria, was printed with the title *Volevo diventare bianca* (*I Wanted to Become White*). These co-authored, autobiographical texts were followed by other narratives by migrants writing in the language of their new home: Italian. As became progressively clear, these first publications and those that promptly ensued, both autobiographical and fictional, were no mere passing phenomenon, despite the contention of early detractors proclaiming them a threat that would contaminate what they considered to be the purity of Italian letters — a constructed, unlikely

purity. On the contrary, these literary texts, connected to rising levels of migration to Italy, marked the beginning of a revitalizing trend in Italian literature.

Graziella Parati and several scholars who have followed up on her pioneering studies have written remarkably about the birth and development of Italy's migrant literature.<sup>1</sup> In Italy, Lidia Curti is among the first to have focused on the intersection between gender and migration in contemporary multicultural Italian letters.<sup>2</sup> Later, I wrote about 'Black Italian literature' noting that several migrant authors writing in Italian come originally from Africa, focusing on the literary quality of their works as African diasporic texts.<sup>3</sup> Yet at this point in history, while Italy has become the native land of so-called third-generation migrants and these works have become part of Italian literature *tout court*, I believe it might be more advantageous to analyze the ways in which these texts relate to the Italian literary tradition as well as to other corpora of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih define 'minor transnational' literature.<sup>4</sup> In articulating the 'minor,' Lionnet and Shih draw from, and expand upon, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorizations. In their essay 'What is a Minor Literature?' included in *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), Deleuze and Guattari, inspired by Franz Kafka's use of the German language in his writings, argue: 'A minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language'.<sup>5</sup> The two French philosophers recognize three distinctive elements in minor literature: the high coefficient of deterritorialization of the language in which it is written; its immediate

1 See Graziella Parati (ed.), *Margins at the Centre: African Italian Voices*, Special Issue of *Studi d'Africanistica nell'Africa Australe/Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, 7:2 (1995); Graziella Parati (ed.), *Mediterranean Crossroads: Migration Literature in Italy* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999); idem, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

2 Lidia Curti, *La voce dell'altra. Scritture ibride tra femminismo e postcoloniale* (Rome: Meltemi, 2006).

3 Alessandra Di Maio, 'Black Italia. Contemporary Migrant Writers from Africa', in Clark Hine, Darlene T. Keaton and S. Small (eds.), *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 119–44.

4 Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (eds.), *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).

5 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986; 1st ed. 1975), p. 16.

political essence; and its collective aspect, which makes it a 'collective machine of expression'.<sup>6</sup> These three elements, they argue, are what make a minor literature 'revolutionary'.<sup>7</sup>

Lionnet and Shih contend that the concept of 'minor' and 'minority' are culturally involved and may change depending on national cultural contexts and in relation to different power structures. In my own application of their theory, 'minor' has a twofold implication. In a larger, global context, it refers to the fact that the writings under consideration are all in Italian, a non-dominant tongue within the largest frame of linguistic imperialism. On the other hand, these texts are produced by minority and diasporic writers whose mother tongue is not necessarily, or not exclusively, Italian, as is especially the case for the first-generation migrant writers. These 'New Italians',<sup>8</sup> for whom Italian is a dominant language, make a 'minor' use of it in their literature.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that these texts are written in Italian already marks them as a legitimate part of Italian literature, while opening up transnationally the concept of a national canon. According to Lionnet and Shih, 'The transnational [...] can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center'.<sup>10</sup> The transnational, in other words, in its various theorizations, never denies the national. On the contrary, it interrogates, redefines and expands it. Elsewhere Lionnet and Shih explain: 'Transnational theory takes as its starting point the recognition that individual and social identities have traditionally been shaped by, and studied according to, the bounded categories of geopolitical location, nation, race, ethnicity and class'. However, they continue, 'In a world increasingly marked by migrations, diasporas and cultural as well as economic globalization, questions of home, community, and allegiance

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6 Ibid., p. 21.

7 Ibid.

8 Charles Richards, *The New Italians* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994); Livia Turco with P. Tavella, *I nuovi italiani. L'immigrazione, i pregiudizi, la convivenza* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005).

9 Simone Brioni applies the notion of 'minor literature' to Somali Italian text referring exclusively to Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of the 'minor'. See Simone Brioni, *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in 'Minor' Italian Literature* (Cambridge and Abingdon: Legenda and Routledge, 2015)..

10 Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*, p. 5.

are constantly being redefined'.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, I argue, in the contemporary era identity needs to be rethought, the role of minority cultures in remapping national boundaries must be acknowledged, and alternative visions and practices of culture ought to be offered. In their text *Minor Transnationalism*, Lionnet and Shih conclude, 'The *national* is no longer the site of homogenous time and territorialized space but is increasingly inflected by a *transnationality* that suggests the *intersection* of 'multiple spatiotemporal (*dis*)orders'. The transnational, therefore, is not bound by the binary of the local and the global and can occur in national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple spatialities and temporalities'.<sup>12</sup>

## Postcolonial Italy: The Somali Community

These considerations prove to be particularly useful in the analysis of Italy's long-neglected postcolonial literary production, which has only recently gained attention from both the public and the academic community. A form of immigration that Italy has largely yet to confront, having attempted to assimilate it to the more general migratory trend involving the nation, is in fact that of migrants from its former colonies and occupied territories in Africa. Since the late 1960s, such groups have arrived in Italy from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia — less so from Libya. In the early years, it was mainly women who arrived in Italy, sometimes with their young children who were soon sent off to *collegi* (boarding institutions), so that their mothers could work full time as domestic workers for Italy's burgeoning upper-middle class. In the following decades, the number increased and men became more numerous, as more and more people were fleeing either brutal dictatorships or civil wars.

Italian colonialism was an altogether distinctive experience. Far from being 'weak',<sup>13</sup> as is too often still commonly thought today whilst many ridicule Mussolini's desire for imperial grandeur and his

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11 Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, Homepage Intro of the UCLA Mellon Postdoctoral Program in the Humanities 'Cultures in Transnational Perspectives', 2006, <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/mellon/index.html>

12 Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*, p. 6, my italics.

13 Giampaolo Calchi Novati, 'L'Italia e il Corno d'Africa: l'insostenibile leggerezza di un colonialismo debole', in Stefano Bellucci and Sante Matteo (eds.), *Africa Italia. Due continenti si avvicinano* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara, 1999), pp. 100–16.



disastrously concluded attempts to reconstruct a novel Roman Empire, Italian colonial politics marked the history of the Horn — of Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Today, this region of the world still experiences the consequences of a problematic postcolonial aftermath. The doyen of Somali letters, writer Nuruddin Farah, born in the city of Baidoa during the Italian colonial domination, suggests that what happens today in Somalia is the result of a historical process that began with colonialism, the consequence of a disastrous ‘post-colonial realpolitik, governed by the anachronistic sentiments of clannism’.<sup>14</sup> Somalia, once partially an Italian colony, declared its independence in 1960. After a spell of democracy, in 1969 Siyad Barre led a coup d’état, remaining in power until January 1991, when he was ousted from Mogadishu by the insurgents’ revolts. After over two decades of dictatorship, Somalia was plagued by almost as many years of civil war, from which it has resurfaced only recently. Across the decades, while the international community declared Somalia a failed state and embassies were being shut down across the world, including in the countries that not so long before had colonized it, the number of people who left behind their homeland was so high that today there are more Somalis living in diaspora than within the reconstituted national borders. It is no accident that for a large percentage of Somali refugees, Italy was the country of first landing. Farah explains,

Italy’s colonialism is full of disasters, of humiliations, a tragic history ending in colonial culs-de-sac. In their self-assessments Italians are of the opinion that their colonialism was less brutal than the French or British subjugation of other African peoples. I doubt it, given that, as colonists, they were belittlers of the people over whom they ruled, whom they never saw as humans, only ‘Negri’, uncivilized primitives, on a par with the beasts in the jungles.<sup>15</sup>

Shifting from the colonial past to the present situation, he continues:

Little has changed in the Italians’ attitude towards the Somalis. There was a time, not long ago, when all Africans were assigned the generic name ‘*Marocchini*’. The Senegalese, who are engaged in pretty trade all over Italy, are known by the pejorative appellation ‘*Vous comprez?*’, in allusion to their question in French ‘*Would you like to buy?*’. For good or

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14 Nuruddin Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), p. 5.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

bad, Somalis had not earned themselves a name in Italian word-making, or a space in their minds, until the civil war. It is as if the Italians are taking a fresh look at the Somalis now because their country is front-page news the world over.<sup>16</sup>

This quote is from Farah's *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000), a non-fictional volume based on hundreds of interviews denouncing the strenuous living conditions of the Somali refugees in the 'sophisticated empire' that is the European Union, which the author defines as the 'single most cohesive, transnational economic unit the world has ever known, the wealthiest and most powerful entity in world history'.<sup>17</sup> In this text, a section is entirely dedicated to the Somali diaspora in contemporary Italy. It was the first time that Farah openly wrote about this subject — an interest that he later cultivated in his trilogy aptly called 'Past Imperfect', made up of the novels *Links* (2005), *Knots* (2007) *Crossbones* (2011), where he references Italy and its colonial past.

It was immediately after the publication of *Rifugiati*, in 2003 (*Refugees* is the title of Farah's *Yesterday, Tomorrow* in Italian), which I translated and prefaced, that I learnt about the existence of a flourishing production of Somali Italian literature.<sup>18</sup> Although I had read, and even reviewed for *Wasafiri*, the 1994 autobiographical text in Italian by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio (Far Away from Mogadishu)*, a diary of the author's journey across countries, and Siran Hassan's *Sette gocce di sangue (Seven Drops of Blood)*, a reflection on infibulation through the story of a friendship between two women published in 1996, I was not aware of the fact that there was a younger generation of Somali Italian writers at work, until one of them, Cristina Ali Farah, contacted me, in response to my Italian edition of Farah's *Yesterday, Tomorrow*. Meanwhile, I had read Igiaba Scego's award-winning short-story *Salsicce (Sausages)* and had met and interviewed the author — she, too, a younger Italian woman writer of Somali origins. Through these writers and their works, I soon found out that there was indeed a 'minor' postcolonial Somali community in Italy such as that Farah described in his important non-fictional text, which, despite its powerful creative

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p. 55.

18 Farah Nuruddin, trans. by Alessandra Di Maio, *Rifugiati. Voci della diaspora somala* (Rome: Meltemi, 2003).

interventions within the national discourse, experienced the constant risk of being marginalized by it. More surprisingly, this was occurring while Italy was finally recovering its colonial past, albeit slowly, after decades of deliberate ignorance. My theory is that in the new millennium the nation could finally accept its past faults, but wished to remain oblivious to those of the present. Italians were finally learning to speak about their fascist and pre-fascist colonial past, thanks to a number of historians and scholars — significantly, not necessarily or exclusively operating within national institutional systems, for a number of them works abroad. Italy was even ready to make some restitution, such as that of the Obelisk of Axum, taken from, and eventually returned to Ethiopia, after having embellished one of Rome's most central piazzas for a number of decades. Yet the nation preferred to remain ignorant of its postcolonial present. Colonialism was, and had to remain, a thing of the past.

Despite its historical responsibility towards those arriving on its shores from the former colonies in relatively large numbers, after a first effort in 1981 — when a law was promulgated granting them a special, temporary permit to stay,<sup>19</sup> — Italy has offered them no form of asylum, neither legally nor in terms of specific social policies. The Somalis who reside in Italy, for instance, as Nuruddin Farah points out in *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, should be considered refugees, having escaped either Siyad Barre's wicked regime or the civil war that ensued its fall and precipitated the nation's collapse. But Italy has never fully enforced the 1951 Geneva Convention on matters of refugees and asylum. Consequently, the Italian media consider Somalis *immigrati* (immigrants), and in the best case the laws treat them as foreigners, or more literally, 'strangers' — *stranieri* — if not simply as undocumented *clandestini*, forgetting the roles the colonizing country has played in their destiny. In Italy, strictly speaking, there is no immigration law, thus the 'immigrant' is not a juridical figure but rather a socially, and, one is tempted to say, mediatically constructed *persona* — or, more accurately, what sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago refers to as a *non-persona*,<sup>20</sup> often undocumented and without access to citizenship (which in Italy is passed

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19 Law 26 December 1981, n. 763

20 Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-Persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999).

on by blood, since *ius sanguinis* is in force). Nonetheless, there continues to be a rather large Somali community in Italy, mostly educated in the colonial system whose main language of instruction was Italian — and it remained so for many years after decolonization, partly even after Somali, until then an oral language, was finally transcribed, in 1972. Moreover, there is a second and third generation of Somali Italians who have become increasingly visible and audible.<sup>21</sup> Among them, a group of Somali Italian writers, most of whom, remarkably, are women, and as such, I would argue, twice ‘minoritized’ in the — borrowing and adapting from Toni Morrison — ‘genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world’ of Italian letters.<sup>22</sup>

### Sites of Intersection: Women Writings

Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego constitute two of the strongest voices among the Somali Italian writers. Both born in Italy in the early 1970s, their relationship with Somalia, their personal stories, as well as their poetics, differ substantially from one another, testifying to the complexity of Somali’s history and its relations with Italy. Scego was born in Rome, where she was brought up and still resides, to Somali parents who fled their country after Barre’s coup d’état. She has visited Somalia but never lived there for any extended period of time. Her writing is ironic, sarcastic, even comic, at points. Most of her stories are set in Rome, the City of her Eternal Obsessions, at once a metaphor for Italy and a private, familiar, and familial space.

On the contrary, Ali Farah, born in Verona to an Italian mother and a Somali father — in a reversal of the typical colonial white-man/Black-woman liaison — was raised in Mogadishu, where her family moved while she was an infant. She returned to Italy as a young adult, via Hungary, escaping Somalia’s civil war. Her stories are set in Italy as well as in Somalia. Her characters, mainly exiles, move in the transnational space of the diaspora — her own Writing Obsession.

With Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and Sirad S. Hassan, also from Somalia, Maria Abbebù Viarengo and Gabriella Ghermandi from Ethiopia,

21 Some of them — musicians, actors, writers, social activists etc. — connect through a network called G2 Seconde Generazioni, <http://www.secondegenerazioni.it/>

22 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 4.

Erminia Dell'Oro and Ribka Sibhatu from Eritrea, together with several others, these women writers have contributed to the creation of what can indeed be considered an Italian postcolonial literary production. Their works have often been read within the migratory literary context, but a more detailed analysis of their texts shows that although they share some of the same preoccupations as other migrant writers, or minority writers, they also present some peculiarities that connect them to the specificity of the Italian postcolonial experience and, by extension, to postcolonial texts in other languages. Most importantly, their transnational texts suggest a reconsideration of the entire concept of postcoloniality, by highlighting, first and foremost through their very existence, what Sandra Ponzanesi, in her compelling study on contemporary women's writing from the Indian and the Afro-Italian diasporas, describes as one of the most evident 'paradoxes' of the postcolonial condition: the implicit assumption that postcolonial literature is mainly expressed in English, the global dominant language, which results in a marginalization of all other postcolonial traditions, such as those expressed in Dutch, French, Portuguese, Italian, and other 'minor' languages.<sup>23</sup> Ponzanesi suggests that the emerging literature by Afro-Italian women offers itself as a unique, largely unknown site of exploration of the contradictions and 'dissymmetrical relationships' that inform postcoloniality, besides contributing to the revival of 'an obscure chapter of Italian history: that of colonialism'.<sup>24</sup> Along these lines, I argue that these writings also contribute to the discovery of the even more obscure chapter of Italy's postcoloniality. This literature contributes to preventing further reproduction of homogenizing and totalitarian theoretical discourses, on the contrary favoring the historical, political and linguistic complexity of the postcolonial condition, by foregrounding what Ponzanesi describes as 'a set of asymmetric relationships in which language, hegemony, gender, ethnicity, and diaspora play a crucial role'.<sup>25</sup> In this light, it comes as no surprise that the Italian postcolonial literary production appears gender-marked, therefore, as I previously inferred following Morrison's suggestions,

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23 Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Cultures. Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

24 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

twice minoritized. And yet, these texts transcend vertical connections in favor of an inclusive horizontality, proposing a dialogue among the already composite Italian literary tradition, those of the once colonized territories, and world literature in its various inflections. Ponzanesi remarks: 'The Italian postcolonial presents itself as an intersection of minority discourses and offers an excellent critical apparatus to make corrections and integrations to the Italian literary canon. Moreover, it allows the Italian literary panorama to be positioned within a European, and transnational, frame, making possible the passage from a local geopolitical specificity to an understanding of global diasporic notions'.<sup>26</sup>

In *Minor Transnationalism*, Lionnet and Shih suggest that the very notion of postcoloniality has become insufficient, concerned as it is with a 'vertical analysis', namely with 'the exploration of relationality between dominant (colonizing cultures) and dominated (colonized) spaces'.<sup>27</sup> However, together with Ponzanesi, I believe that it is fundamental to finally apply the notion of postcoloniality to the Italian context, precisely in order to contribute to the recovery of the long-obliterated historical memory of the vertical relationship between Italy and its former colonies, and, I would argue, to highlight the fact that colonialism is not only a thing of the past but also very much of the present — *passato prossimo*, indeed — since its repercussions are still experienced, and unresolved, in the contemporary nation, as the incessant arrival of a considerable number of postcolonial migrants from the Horn of Africa on the Italian shores demonstrate. The recognition of this power relationship is necessary to debunk Italians' self-appraised myth of being *brava gente* (good people),<sup>28</sup> which, as Farah elucidates in the quote above from *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, is rooted in the nation's consciousness and undauntedly continues into the present, despite contrary past and current evidence. Yet the term 'postcolonial' as I intend it here is not to be interpreted exclusively 'in vertical'. It requires semantic expansion,

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26 Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Il postcolonialismo italiano. Figlie dell'impero e letteratura meticcica', *Quaderni del '900*, 4 (2004), 25–34 (p. 34). In the past few years, an increasing number of scholars has been concerned with a definition of postcoloniality in the Italian context. Among them Curti, *La voce dell'altra*; Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds.), *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2010); Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (eds.), *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

27 Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*, p. 11.

28 See Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente?* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 2005).

resignification. In fact, the Italian postcolonial minor literary formations cross boundaries and also engage horizontally with multiple cultural and linguistic configurations, shuffling hierarchies and reversing power relations. In other words, in the Italian-language texts postcoloniality and transnationality intersect, including and defining each other.

## Language and Power in Cristina Ali Farah

One of the most evident aspects that distinguishes the African Italian postcolonial texts and makes them unique in the transnational frame I have been delineating so far, besides their historical specificity, is their use of language. For most, if not all, these postcolonial writers, independently of their generation, Italian is a mother tongue — usually not the only one, but a mother tongue nonetheless, and more often than not the language of education, of formal schooling. As a consequence, in contrast to the first-generation migrant Italian writers' earliest works to which I initially referred, these texts have not required the linguistic support of a co-author — although now most migrant authors, especially those from the younger generation whose native tongue is Italian, have given up co-authorship and write their own texts autonomously. Moreover, they often emerge as markedly experimental. The Italian postcolonial authors, like most postcolonial writers from different linguistic areas, have appropriated, transformed and enriched the language of the former colonizer by bending it to their own cultural artistic and cultural needs, thus inverting, and transforming, the original, colonial power relations. For them, Italian becomes the chosen site for creative interventions and, ultimately, a site of resistance.

A specific example is offered by the use of some Somali terms that are linguistic borrowings or calques from the Italian, discernible in many of Ali Farah's stories, poems, and above all in her 2007 novel *Madre piccola* (*Little Mother*), a poetic reflection on the Somali diaspora in Europe from an all-female perspective, in which Rome plays a central role. Terms like *farmascio* (from the Italian *farmacia*, pharmacy), *restauranti* (from Italian *ristorante*, restaurant), *olio olivo* (from Italian *olio d'oliva*, olive oil), and *guersce* (from Italian *guercio*, blind in one eye) recur in Ali Farah's works. When, during an interview, I asked Ali Farah what motivated her to choose these terms, she explained,

Contact between languages and cultures has always involved new linguistic acquisitions and contaminations: I think Italian readers should be challenged in this way. Along these lines, [...] I employ Somali variants of Italian words in an attempt to overturn the interior workings of the relationship between language and power.<sup>29</sup>

The relationship between language and power is also challenged in Ali Farah's works by the consistent use of multiple narrating voices: in her longer works of fiction, including her latest novel *Il comandante del fiume* (*The Commander of the River*), published in 2014, all subjects of enunciation are bestowed with equal or equivalent narrative authority. On the other hand, it is not unusual for Ali Farah to shape the form of the monologue to her own artistic ends. She does so in the short stories *RapdiPunt* (*PuntRap*), set among the Afro-Italian youth in Rome; *Interamente* (*Entirely*), a lyrical reflection on how a young woman's life changes in war and in diaspora; *Madre piccola* (*Little Mother*) (2006), on which her later namesake novel is loosely based, the tale of a refugee woman longing to see her daughter; *Un sambuco attraversa il mare* (*A Dhow Crosses the Sea*, 2012), a nostalgic evocation of the narrator's grandmother in the Somalia of her childhood and a somber reflection on exile; and *Il seme del dattero* (*The Seed of the Date*, 2016), a recollection of life in Mogadishu as a young woman. When I inquired about the reasons for her interest in experimenting with voices and first-person narrators, Ali Farah replied, 'First-person narrative, with its individual point of view, is more subtle, less authoritarian, more fragmented than third-person narrative, and it offers a vision of reality that the reader is free to adopt and interpret as she prefers'.<sup>30</sup> Ali Farah's monologues, however, make space for dialogue. Her first-person narrators are often in dialogue with characters that might or might not be fully portrayed in the texts. She explains, 'One of the techniques that I use frequently is to imagine an external interlocutor so that I can add nuance to the voice. The way in which people speak, I believe, changes significantly, depending on whom their interlocutor is'.<sup>31</sup> By employing this narrative device, the

29 Cristina Ali Farah, quoted in Alessandra Di Maio, 'A Poetics of Passage: The Prose of Uba Cristina Ali Farah' (with an interview with the author), in *Metamorphoses. Special Issue: Other Italies/Italy's Others*, 14:1-2 (Spring-Fall 2006), 241-68 (p. 251).

30 Ibid., p. 253.

31 Ibid.



author seems to be proposing a metaphor for the dialogue that her art has been engaging with Italy's dominant discourse, on the one hand, often personified by specific characters usually impersonated by state officers and bureaucrats; and, on the other hand, with the plethora of 'minor, transnational' characters that people her narratives, generally represented for the most part as Somalis living in diaspora.

Ali Farah builds her novel *Madre piccola* around this technique, in which the voices of three first-person female narrators intertwine, converse with each other and with several others, and welcome in their discourses a number of additional voices — for example, those of various Somali poets and singers. In so doing, not only does Ali Farah overturns the vertical relationship between the languages of the colonizer and the colonized but also expands that relationship horizontally, embracing a variety of idioms. The novel, whose timeframe spans from the late 1970s to circa 2004, namely the years of dictatorship and civil war, is about the friendship between two cousins, Domenica Axad and Barni, who grew up together in Mogadishu, were torn apart by the war, and eventually reunite in Rome, where Barni, who works as an obstetrician, helps Domenica have her baby. Barni, we learn, is the newborn's 'little mother': *madre piccola* is the literal translation from the Somali *habaryar*, which is the term for an aunt on the maternal side. The calque in the title subverts power relations linguistically: Italian, the tongue of the colonizer, is manipulated and enriched by that of the former colonized, upon whom a new idiom and concept is imposed — a concept that tackles the lexicon of Italy's most sacred territory, that of the Family.

The baby's father, Taageere, is an old, long-lost acquaintance from childhood whom eventually Domenica meets again in one of the diaspora's multiple sites — a non-identified city in North America, where she is filming parts of a documentary on the daily life of Somali refugees. Taageere's first-person narrative alternates with those of the two cousins in the novel. The three protagonists alternately take the floor, three times each, for a total of nine chapters (nine is a recurring, symbolic number in the novel, which resonates with the nine months of pregnancy). By talking each time to a different interlocutor, the three main characters tell their interwoven personal stories and those of their shattered, displaced community. The result is a choral, poetic narrative which, while offering a compelling portrait of the Somali

diaspora — the three main, symbolic sites in the novel are Mogadishu, Rome, and the unnamed North American metropolis where Taageere lives — intends to recompose the fragments of a collapsed nation disavowed by the international community and forced to live mainly as a transnational minority scattered across continents, as the number of people fleeing their homeland increases daily.

The language in which *Madre Piccola* is written, I wish to argue, is a minor, transnational Italian. Following Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion, and Lionnet and Shih's interpretation, it is the use Ali Farah makes of language, and the way she has her diasporic protagonists reflect on it, that renders this novel an example of minor transnational literature. The tongue of *Little Mother* is that of the former colonizer transformed into the language of postcoloniality through creative manipulation and *métissage*. It mirrors, and represents, the postcolonial community in both Somalia and Italy. Postcoloniality, as has been variously maintained, is the site of hybridity par excellence. In this novel, in particular, postcolonial hybridity is inflected by the feminine,<sup>32</sup> revealing itself as *métissage*. Referring to her days as a child in her native Somalia, Domenica Axad, daughter of a Somali father and an Italian mother, explains: 'The Italian community [in Mogadishu] was mostly made up of mulattos like me'.<sup>33</sup> Even more significantly, the language through which the three diasporic protagonists 'translate' their stories,<sup>34</sup> crossing locations meanwhile making them intelligible to the former colonizer, is a language spoken in the diaspora, and as such it is inflected by the diaspora's several idioms. Words in Somali, first of all, but also in English, since part of the action takes place in North America, run through the text. The idiom of *Madre piccola* is transnational and all-inclusive, and, as such, a crucial site for identity exploration for the diasporic protagonists/narrators of this story. Domenica Axad, the *mulatta*, is particularly aware of this. She is fed by her creator with some of the most acute metalinguistic reflections in the novel. Upon reuniting with her cousin Barni in Rome, after many years of geographic distance, she says,

32 Curti, *La voce dell'altra*.

33 Cristina Ali Farah, *Madre Piccola* (Milan: Frassinelli, 2007). English translation by G. Bellesia-Contuzzi and V. Offredi Poletto, *Little Mother* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 224.

34 On the role of Domenica Axad as a translator, see *ibid.*, pp. 232–33.

My dear Barni, what you knew of me, nothing has remained the same. [...] Even my way of speaking, of expressing myself has considerably changed. As they say, we mixed people are sponges. Mixed travelers. So many languages did I have to, want to learn, here and there, to go inside the people I met.<sup>35</sup>

Language for Domenica Axad, and by extension in the entire novel, becomes a site of resistance, survival, and knowledge. She manipulates it, by alternating silence, words from different idioms, juxtaposing them with images from different places — the images she films for her documentary. But her Italian, especially her written Italian, remains deliberately sophisticated. Chapter 8 in the novel coincides with a letter she writes to a psychologist, presumably a social worker, to whom she explains,

As you may have observed, I use obsolete, outdated words. It is a seductive game. I speak in a difficult way. I use tortuous constructions. Especially when I begin my discourse, because I want to demonstrate what limit I can reach with my language. I want everybody to know without a shadow of a doubt that this language belongs to me. It is my stammering, the plural subject that raised me, the name of my essence, my mother.<sup>36</sup>

In her 'minor' use of her mother — and mother's — tongue, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari, is Domenica Axad's revolution, as well as her creator's. Axad's awareness of the political implication of language-based relations contains in a nutshell her inventor's manifesto. Ali Farah's use of language brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's theorizations,

What is great, what is revolutionary, is the minor [...]. A language remains a pastiche, a schizophrenic mix, a Harlequin costume through which many different linguistic functions and distinct power centers are practiced, suggesting what can and cannot be said: one can play one function against the other, let the coefficients of territoriality and deterritorialization play with, and against, one another. Even a major language can be used in an intensive way that gives life to an absolute deterritorialization. [...] So much invention, and not only lexical — lexicon is just a little part of it; rather, sober syntactic invention.<sup>37</sup>

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35 Ibid., p. 97.

36 Ibid., p. 254.

37 Ibid., pp. 47–48.

For Domenica Axad her mother('s) tongue also 'translates' her father's language — Somali. She comments on her own role as a child translator in the family: her mother never learnt Somali, so she became her 'translator', a 'dissimulator', a 'ferrywoman'; ultimately, 'a connoisseuse of the human soul'.<sup>38</sup> As her double name testifies, she embraces both Somali and Italian as two inseparable parts of her own linguistic identity, like a double 'half which is a whole'.<sup>39</sup> Proud of her linguistic skills, she also exhorts her fellow-countrymen and women to hold on to Somali, the language of the fatherland (and of her father). Sharing a language is one of the most effective ways to create community.

Teaching to write your native tongue, communicating in the words of your father and mother despite the distance: this is what will allow us to hold on to each other tightly, without having other people's languages to separate us. Learn the alphabet, brothers: B T J.<sup>40</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that her voice becomes a resonating chamber echoing that of the Somali poet Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad 'Yamyam', whose verses from the 1977 patriotic song '*Soomaali baan ahay*' (I am the Somali) intertwine with her words throughout the novel epilogue.

Every character in the novel reflects on the way he or she uses language, on the power structures imposed by linguistic systems, and on the possibilities or subverting them. But primarily, *Madre piccola* reminds its Italian readers that the language once imposed by the colonizer has eventually become a first language for the present postcolonial subjects. Although for a relatively limited period of time, Italian — paraphrasing Chinua Achebe's comments on English in *Hopes and Impediments* — became an African language, in the sense that it was spoken on the African soil. And it has been passed on to the newer generations, albeit fragmentarily. Thus, the original native speaker has lost his or her exclusive access to his or her mother tongue, which is now equally shared with the former colonized. Complimented on her excellent Italian by a fictional Italian journalist who interviewed her intending to write a reportage on the Somali community in Rome, Barni responded:

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38 Ibid., p. 233.

39 Ibid., p. 1.

40 Ibid., p. 4.

Are you complimenting me on my Italian? I have known this language since childhood. I learnt it in elementary school, which I attended with my cousin Axad. But you ought to know this: we Somalis almost always know Italian. At least my uncles, until the past generation. I used to practice it with my cousin, Domenica Axad, Italian-Somali.<sup>41</sup>

Somali embraces Italian, balancing relations off. Later in the story, Taageere, commenting on the elderly Somali making *marinata* dressing for the lamb they are barbecuing in the courtyard of the North American project where they live, says: 'They said exactly that: *marinata*. The elders profoundly own Italian, they own it, profoundly. Imagine how it must be to learn a language as a child, when your head knows no preoccupations and has enough space to be filled with all the words you wish'.<sup>42</sup>

However, just like people, even language changes with time, as does its social status. What once was the idiom of prestige, spoken by 'the well-mannered men with a position, working in the school system or as high officers at the ministry or in the army',<sup>43</sup> has eventually been reduced to a grotesque caricature of itself in the general collapse undergone by the nation. Young Taageere used to attend the Italian Cultural Centre in Mogadishu because he wanted to learn to speak fluent Italian, like a 'man of class': an 'Italian so fluent and copious that it would emerge here and there even when I spoke Somali. Here and there, often. I, too, want to speak like them, an Italian term every three Somali words. How elegant. Will it become natural to me, as if I had learnt the language as a child? I never knew: war made me give up'.<sup>44</sup> Yet, what is left of the Italian learnt at the *Centro Culturale* to a more mature Taageere, refugee in North America, is only a decent understanding and quite a few swearwords with which to challenge another 'minor, transnational' Italian — a Sicilian, he, too, sharing the same destiny of the diaspora:

I looked at the Sicilian young man and told him: look, *gli occhi!* And he was scared to death, because he did not know that I spoke Italian, so he told me right away: you're mad! And I replied: *vaffanculu!*<sup>45</sup> And so forth. But I won. In the end, I knew more swearwords than he did.<sup>46</sup>

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41 Ibid., p. 14.

42 Ibid., p. 192.

43 Ibid., p. 82.

44 Ibid.

45 Orthographical corruption of *vaffanculo* (go to hell).

46 Ibid., p. 220.

If Italian is the idiom of the élite, torn apart by the diaspora, language in general, in *Little Mother*, is what best represents the transformation of the diaspora. Language is a synonym for community, at home and abroad. It embraces pride, national belonging, fear of transformation, nostalgia for the past. It is indeed a metaphor for the survival of the community.

## Conclusion: Across Boundaries

Ali Farah and the other Italian postcolonial women writers have primarily in common an artistic agenda. Each in her own way, they portray a nation where the colonial past and especially the postcolonial present are central, proposing a dialogue that challenges those who are partial to monologue or historical revisionism, and persevere in believing in an alleged national monolithic identity. The protagonists of their transnational texts, disparate though they may be, similarly interrogate themselves on questions of belonging and show major concern in the construction of an individual identity which takes into consideration the totality of their life's experience. In so doing, each in their own voice, they all speak a 'minor, transnational' Italian, be it marked, like in Ali Farah's texts, by the reappropriation, within the frame of a national standard, of the Italian borrowings that entered the Somali language during colonialism, a calque such as that which gives the title to the novel, or the intersection of several languages. In conclusion, one may advance that Somali Italian literature, and, more generally, postcolonial Italian literature has been largely ignored by scholars because, among other considerations, it is a 'minor' one that does not involve a 'major' colonial power and language. Moreover, one might assume with some legitimacy that one of the reasons it has been long overlooked is that it is mainly produced by women writers, more specifically, by minority women writers. Whatever the case, Ali Farah's novel *Little Mother*, like the other Somali Italian literary texts, by speaking up from a 'minor' perspective, are calling for attention and connections, demanding to be inscribed in the literary and cultural history of Italy, Europe, Africa, and the contemporary global world.

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