Teaching Italian as an L2/FL Through Contemporary Italian Literature by Women Writers of Migrant Origin
A Conversation with Sumaya Abdel Qader About
Quello che abbiamo in testa

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Abstract   Literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin have been analysed in several literary and comparative studies, but still scarcely investigated from a teaching perspective. This article explores their linguistic and intercultural potentialities, taking Sumaya Abdel Qader's *Quello che abbiamo in testa* (2019) as a case study. Following is an interview with the author about women's writing and representation in contemporary Italian literature. Both the teaching considerations and the key aspects of the interview support the use of literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin to teach Italian as an L2/FL.

Keywords   Italian as an L2/FL. Women writers. Migrant origin. Sumaya Abdel Qader.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Teaching Potentialities of Literary Works by Italian Women Writers of Migrant Origin. – 2.1 Linguistic Potentialities. – 2.2 Intercultural Potentialities. – 3 A Case Study: *Quello che abbiamo in testa* by Sumaya Abdel Qader. – 3.1 Linguistic Level. – 3.2 Intercultural Level. – 4 An Interview with Sumaya Abdel Qader. – 5 Conclusions.

1   Introduction

Several literary and comparative studies have examined literary works by immigrant and Italian women writers of migrant origin, focusing on the gender dimension (Carroli 2010; Curti 2011; Paynter 2017) and including interviews with the authors (Comberiati 2009; Camilotti, Zangrando 2010; Miceli 2019). Nevertheless, the didactic use of these literary productions has been scarcely researched for the teaching of Italian as a Second and Foreign Language (henceforth L2 and FL). Although investigations have dealt with the pedagogical potentialities of migration literature (Cuconato 2017), a reduced number of textbooks of Italian as an L2/FL includes them (Borri, Bertini 2016; Di Filippo, Di Florio 2017; Bertolio 2021), and empirical research is just partially developed in the L2 perspective (Camilotti, Civai 2018; Zannoni, Sirotti 2019).

This article contributes to promoting the use of literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin to teach Italian as L2/FL. To do so, it will explore their linguistic and intercultural potentialities by considering Sumaya Abdel Qader's novel *Quello che abbiamo in testa*[1] (2019) as a case study. These topics will be further developed throughout the interview with the author. The goal is to provide both theoretical reflections and didactic suggestions to design and implement pedagogical practices in Second Language Acquisition (henceforth SLA).

2   The Teaching Potentialities of Literary Works by Italian Women Writers of Migrant Origin

Using literature in the L2/FL classroom brings several benefits to SLA (Carroli 2008; Paran 2008; Parkinson, Reid Thomas 2010; Di Martino, Di Sabato 2014; Tsang, Paran, Lau 2020). It enhances the development of linguistic and communicative competence, fosters historical-cultural enrichment, and encourages the development of intercultural reflections (Gonçalves Matos 2012; 2020; Spaliviero 2020; Ballester, Spaliviero 2021).

Employing women writers' literary works provides the added value of drawing attention to gender issues. Besides the possibility of reflecting on female representations, it fosters the acquisition of the critical tools needed to observe the present reality and to question the current social system (Sapegno 2014).

1   'What we wear on our Heads' (transl. by the Author).

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The further selection of Italian women writers of migrant origin's productions promotes SLA and gender education from an intercultural perspective. Within the contexts of foreign immigration to Italy (L2 perspective) and of Italian emigration abroad (FL perspective), these texts increase the awareness of the intersections between gender issues and discrimination, marginalisation, and exclusion processes caused by different linguistic and cultural traditions, and religious beliefs (Coppola, Sabelli 2014).

The combination of SLA, gender education, and the analysis of the multilingual and multicultural identities of Italian women writers of migrant origin, as well as those of their characters, aims to challenge stereotypes and prejudices, demonstrate women's social role in fostering the intercultural dialogue, and envision inclusive cities.

2.1 Linguistic Potentialities

The acquisition of communicative competence in an L2/FL should include the development of the capacity of reading literary works, since literature fosters the improvement of linguistic abilities and provides evidence of the close connection between language and culture (Carroli 2008; Paran 2008; Di Martino, Di Sabato 2014; Tsang, Paran, Lau 2020).

Literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin reveal their multilingual background, which contributes to enriching the Italian language, fostering characters' realistic representations, and portraying the linguistic heterogeneity of contemporary Italy. The influence of the first language of writers' parents is evident in the insertion of non-Italian lexemes connected to cultural-specific elements of the family's country of origin (religion, food, clothes, etc.) (Ferrari 2020). Moreover, the reference to the parents' mother tongue deals with the use of phraseological expressions, cultural-specific formulas, social rituals (such as the act of greetings), and involves the development of metalinguistic reflections. These inclusions show both the absence of equivalent words in Italian and the linguistic and cultural heritage of non-Italian speech communities. Thus, literary multilingualism reflects the co-existence of diverse social habits and cultural traditions within the same national territory. Finally, the insertion of Italian incorrect word and sentence structures caused by the interference of the non-native Italian characters' mother tongue is less present than the previous immigrant writers' productions since for most literary figures Italian is no longer an L2 but an L1.

Moreover, the language of these literary productions is often integrated by Italian linguistic varieties and other foreign languages, that both reinforce the multilingual nature of these texts and reveal

the linguistic diversity of the peninsula. At a diachronic level, these texts include regional varieties, popular words and phrases belonging to family registers, and dialect expressions. At a diatopic level, the insertion of regional Italian varieties deals with specific lexical and syntactical choices. In turn, the introduction of regional and local dialects is associated with the expression of emotively loaded concepts, exclamations, and interjections (Kiemle 2011). These discourse markers are often transferred through the code-switching phenomena from standard Italian to the diatopic varieties of the characters' regional contexts. The additional presence of other foreign language terms and idioms confirms the existence of a global communicative reality, marked by linguistic contacts and loanwords through mass media (Serianni, Antonelli 2011), and is connected to a more in-depth knowledge of foreign languages by the younger generation, that also appear as literary figures. Young characters' dialogues reproduce a simulated orality thanks to the combined use of both slang words and foreign language terms, that define their affiliation with a specific generation. At a diaphasic level, this literature involves the whole range of Italian linguistic registers. Depending on the communicative situation, the Italian literary language varies from a formal to an informal register, up to a daily and colourful colloquial one. At a diastratic level, literary figures' characterisation is as realistic as their ways of expression reflect their membership to a certain social stratum.

On this basis, in the L2/FL classroom, literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin expose students to the multilingual and multicultural features of contemporary Italian language, while contributing to renewing it. Besides supporting the acquisition of standard Italian, these texts allow the students both to focus on linguistic phenomena and to reflect on their cultural implications, enhancing the development of sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and intercultural competences. The linguistic potentialities of using these literary productions consist in the opportunity to train:

    a.   receptive language skills: by developing reading strategies dealing with both literal and inferential understanding, expanding the vocabulary, recognising diverse linguistic registers, and reinforcing listening abilities by teachers' and writers' reading aloud;

    b.   productive language skills: by students' reading aloud, engaging in monologue activities, and experimenting with creative writing.

In addition, employing these literary productions gives the students the possibility of learning about women writers' cultural backgrounds and gaining intercultural awareness of their multiple world perceptions that stand behind the use of certain words or expres-

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sions. Multilingualism fosters both the analysis of the Italian sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules that establish the appropriateness and the efficacy of a communicative act within specific social events, and the reflection on the use of the above-mentioned linguistic variants according to temporal, spatial, social, and contextual variables (Danesi, Diadori, Semplici 2018). This aspect is particularly useful in the FL perspective, where the linguistic input is generally correct thanks to teachers' mediation and the adoption of textbooks, but also inauthentic. Concurrently, it is also suitable for the L2 perspective, where the linguistic input is authentic thanks to its availability within the environment, but often incorrect unless its carefully analysed at linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic levels (Balboni 2014).

The teaching techniques to train students' linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and intercultural competences correspond to activities before, during, and after reading a selected excerpt.

The teaching techniques to employ before approaching the text include open questions on students' experiences connected to the main literary topics; brainstorming on literary key words; combinations of images and words taken from the excerpt; and predictions on the literary content based on the paratext (cover, title, author of the book, etc.). Students can be asked to think about their previous experiences with either multilingual contexts or the first language of writer's family; to write/say all the known Italian words and expressions associated with a specific linguistic register or youth language; and to combine images and popular words in regional and dialect varieties.

The teaching techniques to use during and after reading aim at verifying the global and the analytical comprehension. They evolve from general activities, such as hypothesis testing, filling out grids and tables, answering closed and open questions, to targeted exercises, like identifying specific terms and idioms in the text, groupings, and matching words and definitions. In order to test the understanding of specific lexical and cultural items, students can be asked to underline all the terms in the mother tongue of the writers' family, Italian linguistics varieties, or youth languages; to highlight diverse varieties of Italian linguistic registers; to group the multilingual words and expressions into different homogeneous sets; to match words in the same language or variety with their standard Italian translations.

The teaching techniques to use after reading comprise students' reading aloud, elaborating monologues, and experimenting with creative writing. Students can be asked to produce a correct, appropriate, and effective discourse by re-utilising the previously analysed words and expressions; and to re-write the excerpt varying some elements, such as the linguistic registers (from informal to formal), and varieties (from youth language slang to standard Italian).

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2.2 Intercultural Potentialities

Literature enhances the development of contextualisation and relational abilities, that form part of the acquisition of communicative competence in an L2/FL (Gonçalves Matos 2012; 2020; Spaliviero 2020; Ballester, Spaliviero 2021). Contextualising literary works permits an in-depth understanding of their original meanings with respect to the historical and cultural reference framework, and to the author's biography. Literature also fosters the opportunity to discuss stereotypes and prejudices using relational abilities in order to overcome such superficial visions.

Literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin are characterised by a multicultural essence that contributes to combining gender and intercultural dimensions, overcoming the anachronistic perception of national identities, and stimulating reflections on Italian multiethnic society. They foster the development of an empathetic attitude towards a socio-cultural group (represented by both the writers and their characters) which lives a double condition of disadvantage, for being women and of migrant origin, that exposes them to gender and racial discriminations. Concurrently, they are an empowerment tool, since they draw attention to the high number of Italian women of migrant origin writers, and contrast to the widespread ethnocentric and prejudicial visions of foreign women (Camilotti, Zangrando 2010).

Furthermore, they promote an in depth debate on the so-called 'second generations', who represent a fully-fledged part of the Italian society. While supporting the re-consideration of the 'Italianness' concept, they turn the spotlight on the political, legal, and administrative situation that Italian people born from immigrant families have to face in daily life (Coppola, Sabelli 2014).

The combination of gender and intercultural dimensions promotes the use of an intersectional perspective to analyse literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin that connects gender topics to other categories, such as social status, religious belief, and ethnic background (Coppola, Sabelli 2014). As a result, multicultural characters are interpreted through their double role of product and producer of relationships within an authentic consideration of Italian socio-cultural dynamics (Camilotti, Crivelli 2017).

In this scenario, in the L2/FL classroom literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin reflect the multicultural features of the contemporary Italian society, while questioning and reshaping its national identity. Despite their fictional nature, these texts foster the development of students' cognitive and emotional skills aimed at critically understanding the real world, at considering diversity as an intrinsic Italian socio-cultural feature, and at overcoming the cultural differences that are not so easily addressed in daily life. The in-

tercultural potentialities of using these literary works afford the opportunity to reinforce:

a. contextualisation skills: by situating the texts within the cultural context of production, relating them to the author's biography, and interpreting them through the identification of the writer's messages;

b. relational skills: by interacting with the classmates, interpreting the texts from the present perspective, and developing a deeper awareness of oneself and of the Italian multicultural reality.

The interaction with these literary productions and other students facilitates the improvement of integrated language skills of an interactive type, by developing argumentative capacities and relational competences during classroom discussions, and of a manipulative type, by summarising and paraphrasing peers' ideas in pair and group activities. The connection between the use of linguistic, contextualisation, and relational skills takes place when students become aware of the historical and cultural position from which they read the texts; establish a dialogue to explain their reasons and listen to their classmates' opinions; accept the existence of different interpretations of the same text; use emotional resources to empathise with the writers, the characters, and their classmates; and build a common discourse in which the cultural implications that may compromise communication are clarified. These potentialities are beneficial in the FL perspective, where the cultural input is filtered by the proposals of the teacher and of textbooks, but also partial and outdated. Moreover, they are useful in the L2 perspective, where students can (re) think the reference models of the country in which they are living.

The teaching techniques aimed at reinforcing students' contextualisation and relational skills should be based on the hermeneutic approach and on social mediation methods (Spaliviero 2020).

The teaching techniques that support the development of contextualisation skills focus on the comprehension of the historical and cultural coordinates of literary productions, for example by answering to closed and open questions, and of Italian women writers of migrant origin's biographies, for instance by summarising the stages of their lives. Moreover, they deal with the interpretation of the past meanings from writers' perspectives, for example by identifying specific elements in the text, groupings, and matching words and definitions regarding textual significances.

The teaching techniques that enhance the acquisition of relational skills explore the intersections between literary productions and contemporary life, the interpretation of the present meanings from students' perspectives, and pair and group interaction aimed at training students to defend opinions, respect other students' ideas, and build

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common discourses through the negotiation of meanings. Through the use of social mediation methods (such as peer tutoring and co-operative learning), students can be asked to discuss relevant and personal episodes dealing with the intercultural topics of the literary works; re-write the excerpt varying some elements, such as the historical context (from present to future time); discuss the current textual significances; and take notes on peers' current interpretations. The proposals of cognitive decentralisation activities, both inside and outside literary works, valorise students' points of view and promote the evolution from an ethnocentric view to an open thinking that assimilates the multiple representations of reality without denying one's own linguistic and cultural identity.

3 A Case Study: *Quello che abbiamo in testa* by Sumaya Abdel Qader

Quello che abbiamo in testa represents the opportunity of analysing the gender dimension from an intercultural perspective and on multiple levels, since women are both the subject and the object of the novel.

On the one hand, Sumaya Abdel Qader is an Italian woman of migrant origin, as she was born in Italy into a Jordanian-Palestinian family. Besides being a writer, she graduated in Biology, Linguistic Mediation, and Sociology. She collaborates with voluntary organisations that support Muslim women victims of discrimination, and in 2016 she became the first Muslim municipal councillor of Milan.

On the other hand, the protagonist is Horra, an Italian woman of migrant origin who was born in a Muslim Jordanian family and lives in Milan with her family. She works as a secretary in a law firm, she is finishing her university studies in law, she does voluntary service in an association that helps foreign discriminated women, she cultivates her faith by attending mosque, she is a wife and a mother, and she goes out with her heterogeneous group of friends. After reading an article on the oppressive function of the Islamic headscarf and assisting the umpteenth Muslim woman fired for wearing the veil, she reacts against the generalised idea according to which all Muslim women are submissive human beings, and she reflects on female roles and representations within a realistic contemporary Italian society. From that moment onwards, she starts challenging stereotypes, prejudices, and generalisations in order to feel finally free to be an Italian Muslim woman of migrant origin who is completely aware of the time and the space she is living in.

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3.1 Linguistic Level

Quello che abbiamo in testa represents a glimpse into the contemporary Italian language. Its linguistic features include the Arabic language, Italian linguistic varieties, and other foreign languages.

The novel is rich in Arabic words and expressions, that is the mother tongue of the protagonist's parents. Non-Italian lexemes are often associated with cultural-specific elements of Horra's country of origin, such as *haram* and *burkini*. As regards the concept of *haram* (sin), she describes the evolution of her parents' attitude from a strict to a flexible interpretation of the religious precepts, that still safeguards their identity without the bad influence of a distorted human interpretation of the divine will. On the occasion of her daughter's swimming course, Horra compares the adult people's judgmental attitude, while observing her wearing the *burkini* at the beach, with the enthusiastic response of her daughter's classmates, and expresses her admiration and hope for the younger generation. Moreover, Arabic phraseological expressions depict different cultural views on the world, like *bel gharb wel ghorba* (in the West, in the diaspora), that stands for the migratory experience of Horra's parents. The insertion of Arabic formulas in certain speech acts reveals specific cultural conventions. By referring to her adolescent requests to go out, Horra recalls her parents answering *InshaAllah* (Allah willing) for the impossibility of using the future tense in the Arabic culture, since future predictions are just in the hands of God. In addition, within the novel there are metalinguistic references to the characteristics of the Arabic language. Horra clarifies some Arabic lexical and phonetic features by explaining that God has ninety-nine names in Islam, and by reproducing the sound of the initial *h* of her name. She establishes a parallel between the Arabic *shu esmo* and the Italian *coso* (both mean 'thing'). She scolds her daughters for not employing proper Italian terms, but she also fondly remembers the corresponding Arabic expression that her grandparents used. She comments on her little knowledge of Arabic in contrast with the stereotypes of her proficiency level and non-Italian nationality due to her parents' origin. Within the novel there are some examples of Italian incorrect pronunciation by a Moroccan character, Fatima, because of her mother tongue interference. The phonetic errors are made 'visible' and 'audible' through the reproduction of a dialogue and the incorrect transcriptions of the words, such as *nienti*, *rigolarminte*, and *pilligrinaggio* (instead of *niente* 'nothing', *regolarmente* 'regularly', *pellegrinaggio* 'pilgrimage').

Moreover, the novel combines a range of words and expressions that reflects Italian linguistic varieties and foreign languages. The code-switching phenomena from standard Italian to the diatopic variety of the Milanese dialect takes place frequently. While Horra is

thinking about her daughter and receives a phone call from her, she recalls her mother saying that this means that Zena is blessed by the angels, and comments to herself: *sperèmm* (standard Italian: *speriamo*, 'hopefully'). Also colloquial and popular words associated with family registers appear frequently. To show her disapproval at buying her daughter a pair of trousers because of the status they represent, Horra uses a colloquial register to ironically describe the act of paying: *sgancio un "deca" dopo l'altro* (standard Italian: *pago una banconota da dieci euro dopo l'altra*, 'I drop a ten euro banknote after another').

The foreign language words and expressions are employed both by Horra and her daughters, who study English and German at school. The protagonist often employs English terms and idioms that belong to mass media and labour market semantic fields (such as *post* and *mobbing*), or that have gradually entered the Italian language as loanwords. She she tries to *sembrare cool* (to look cool) when signing for her daughter's release from her swimming course. In turn, Horra's daughters replace Italian words and expressions by using the German and English translations. Zena says *es gefällt mir nicht* (I don't like it) and *what about my privacy?!* to respectively communicate her dislike for her mother's veil, and after seeing Horra taking a photo of her at the clothing store. Moreover, they combine English terms with slang expressions that belong to their youth language. Zena explains that she invited her mother to go shopping because *mi serviva il cash, i money* (I need cash, money), and when speaking about music with her peers they comment *è per sfigati raga – be', meglio dei tuoi trapper* (it's for losers – well, it's better than your trappers).

Finally, Horra's oral speech comprises Italian formal, informal, and colloquial registers, depending on the communicative event and on the dialogue partners. When meeting clients at the law firm, she uses a refined formal register, employing courtesy forms (*Lei* instead of *tu* for the second person singular). On the contrary, while reflecting on what to write in a Facebook post, she wonders who will read *tutta 'sta roba* (standard Italian: *tutta questa cosa*, 'all this stuff'). Finally, she uses a colloquial register, defined by metaphoric vocabulary and colourful idioms, to describe the scene in which she arrives at work *in straritardo* (super late), imagines saying to her boss, who asks her to come urgently to his office, *Senti, non capisco che diavolo vuoi, quindi se vuoi cazziarmi fallo* (Listen, I don't know what the hell do you want, so if you want to yell at me, then do it), and hears him replying *Brava, è una bomba!* (Well done, it's a bomb!) regarding her Facebook post.

3.2   Intercultural Level

Quello che abbiamo in testa describes some representative traits of the multiethnic Italian society through a realistic portrayal of an Italian Muslim woman of migrant origin within an authentic Milanese urban space. At the same time, it reproduces the most widespread stereotypes and prejudices regarding immigrant and Italian of migrant origin women, with the aim of analysing and denying these simplified ethnocentric visions.

The novel addresses the issue of the multicultural identity of Italian women of migrant origin through the description of the protagonist's backgrounds and daily life. The meaning of her Arabic first name is literally translated as 'free' and accurately explained in order to introduce the theme of Italian women of migrant origin's freedom and self-determination. Horra reflects on the inherent limitations of the 'freedom' concept, that especially characterise Italian of migrant origin women's lives, who simultaneously contain multiple identities that are difficult to 'label' within fixed classification schemes. In fact, throughout the novel she constantly swings over the border of the Occidental and the Oriental worlds feeling often excluded by both dimensions. This condition of cultural suspension is shared by other figures. When presenting her two daughters, Horra points out their main differences, explaining that they have both been educated to respect religious traditions but developed diverse attitudes towards the veil with the result that just one of them wears it. While illustrating the story of her family, she underlines the different perception of 'home' from her parents' and siblings' perspectives that initially causes the feeling of living in limbo. According to her father and mother, 'home' is their country of origin and is situated in the *hara*.[2] For this reason, they haven't bought either the Italian house where they have been living for fifteen years or a single piece of furniture. On the contrary, for Horra and her siblings 'home' is in Italy, that is the country where they were born, have grown up, and want to become adults.

Moreover, the novel details the relationship between Horra and the social and cultural environment of Milan. She narrates how people's glances at her differ depending on the diverse locations of the city. When she enters the metro, she usually notices the surrounding people's negative impressions because of her veil, in spite of the freedom that defines both her name and her choices. Instead, while she passes through *via Padova*, defined as one of the most multiethnic streets of Milan, she perceives that her veil goes almost unno-

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[2]   The middle class neighbourhood in Jordan where Horra's grandparents reside and also her parents want to live.

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ticed among the objects and clothes that people of various religions and cultural traditions wear.

In addition, the novel presents a series of common stereotypes and prejudices regarding immigrant and Italian of migrant origin women, and in particular those who are Muslim and wear the veil. While doing voluntary service, Horra comes into contact with several cases of discriminated women who can't find a job because of their foreign origins, or are hired only to do menial jobs, work as cleaners, and take care of the elderly, regardless of their qualifications. Then, she describes the difficulty of renting a house after showing up in person to the owners, who frequently change their mind after seeing her veil. She refers to the typical comments on her veil depending on the season: during the summer people ask whether she is dying of the heat, whereas during the winter they are envious for not keeping as warm as they think she is. When introducing a blond-haired, clear-skinned, and blue-eyed Muslim friend of hers, Horra reports people's incredulous reactions and their difficulty in accepting that Muslim women are not only dark-haired and Arab. After hearing a man calling her and her friends 'talibans', they speak about the faulty generalisations on Muslim women who wear the veil by recognising that oppressed Muslim women do exist, but they don't represent the entire category. On the contrary, Horra symbolises a different model of the Italian Muslim woman of migrant origin, who disputes to these ethnocentric visions by considering that wearing the veil is a rebellious and feminist act. On reading the article on the submissive function of the Islamic headscarf, she acknowledges that wearing the veil is not always the result of a conscious decision, but she also reflects on the freedom of many Muslim women's spiritual journeys by remembering her choice to start wearing the veil.

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4 An Interview with Sumaya Abdel Qader

I interviewed Sumaya Abdel Qader in order to know her opinions regarding the role that literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin, and in particular *Quello che abbiamo in testa*, play in fostering SLA, gender education, and the intercultural dialogue.[3] The purpose of the interview is to connect the previous teaching considerations to the ideas of the author, who both lives and narrates the multilingual and multicultural identities. As written in the novel, the facts are inspired by true stories.

[C.S.]   In your opinion, what contribution can the works of contemporary Italian literature regarding women and written by Italian women writers of migrant origin make within the current Italian, multilingual, and multicultural educational system? I am speaking about all the age groups, from the middle school onwards, including the courses of Italian as an L2 and FL for adult learners.

[S.A.Q.]   The contribution that works of contemporary Italian literature regarding women, and written by Italian women writers of migrant origin, can make is extremely important because there is still little awareness of what the story of a migrant is. In addition, the woman's point of view is particular and can give an added value to the narration. In spite of this, I often collaborate with schools and I have noticed that the reading of works by writers of migrant origin is near zero. At least, it has never happened to me to see a teacher suggesting this kind of reading to their students. On the other hand, works by migrants' sons and daughters have started to circulate, and to date several works by Italian women writers of migrant origin have been published. Just think, for example, of Igiaba Scego's works. I have also seen some extracts of my works in middle and upper secondary school textbooks. Moreover, I noticed that also some university courses have also begun to include them. Despite this, we are still considered as migrant authors. In the libraries I have often found my works under the label of 'migrant writers'. Instead, I am an Italian writer with a migrant background, since my parents lived a migratory experience. I have never lived such an experience and so I have no idea of what it means, except for the stories that my family and other acquaintances told me. Therefore, having a voice in this sense is very useful to furthering understanding of who some of the students attending the current Italian school system are, since there

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are more and more pupils who have lived a migratory experience, or were born from people who had lived it. Actually, these students are either considered as 'normalised' pupils, that is, exactly like their classmates who were born within Italian families and cultural traditions, or as 'migrant' students, whose stories often fail to emerge, as if their personal migratory experience or their parents' one were like a halo – present, but not so visible. What else is a problem? The Italian publishing system doesn't have much of a choice. In other countries people read a lot and the literary production by writers of migrant origin is bigger. Maybe in Italy the situation is different because of the general diffidence of the average Italian towards reading and writing. Besides, people continue talking about recent immigration, whereas the threshold of forty years of migration has almost been reached and so in Italy the migratory experience doesn't represent a recent phenomenon anymore. To sum up, I definitely consider the reading of Italian writers of migrant origin and especially of women – since the female approach is always distinctive – very fruitful.

[C.S.]   How does your identity as a woman writer, but also as a sociologist and a politician, influence your writing?

[S.A.Q.]   This is a problem [laughing]. Let me explain. Except for a contribution in a book, I generally don't write scientific papers. I write novels using simple, popular language. Nevertheless, since in my mind I have complex concepts and categories, and I do think in a structured and scientific language, translating these schemes into a simple story and language, comprehensible to all, is really hard. In other words, to express the complexity of which one is deeply aware in a novel, is a tough proposition. I would like to write a million things but I can't, I would like to develop thinking but I already know that it won't be possible to cover it all. I mean, the Muslim woman who plays the main character in my novel can't represent *all* Muslim women. And this concerns also my involvement in the screenplay of *Skam Italia*.[4] People said that my characters don't represent all Muslim women. Of course they can't! My stories just show a little piece of the world. Thus, all the stories I have written can be combined in order to depict complementary nuances about the same topic. To conclude, my identity is both complicated, because it makes it difficult for me to develop complex themes in a popular and accessible language, and useful, since it allows me to have an articulated vision of the world as well as to recognize and to deepen its various dimensions.

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4 *Skam Italia* is a webseries on Generation Z and consists of four seasons. The protagonist of the fourth season is Sana, an Italian Muslim girl of migrant origin.

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[C.S.]   In your latest novel, *Quello che abbiamo in testa*, there are several Arabic words and expressions. For example, the concept of *haram*, the significance of greetings, the meaning and the perception of *Allah Akbar*. In your opinion, what educational opportunities would these words and expressions offer during their reading within the school context?

[S.A.Q.]   First of all, there must be an effort to restore dignity to words. They are often inappropriately used as well as constantly loaded with more and more political connotations. Just think of the word 'immigrant', which has acquired an increasingly negative political charge. Once it was differently perceived, and a 'migrant' was almost a poetical figure. Today, the 'immigrant' is a figure associated to horrible concepts and to somebody who invades our country. Second, in my latest novel I decided to insert Arabic words because they belong to my linguistic identity. Strictly speaking, Arabic is my mother tongue, since I spent the first three years of my life at home, with my family, where I just listened to and spoke Arabic. Even if I was born and raised in Italy, Italian was introduced later, at the kindergarten, when it became my first language. As a result, I don't have the same linguistic and communicative competence in Arabic as I have in Italian. Hence, in *Quello che abbiamo in testa* I didn't choose random Arabic words to insert. On the contrary, I selected specific Arabic words whose original meanings are usually distorted by the common imagination, in order to restore their dignity and importance. I explained it in the novel: for a Muslim, the expression *Allah Akbar* is imbued with spirituality. Despite this, it has become one of the most hated expressions. Even Muslim kids don't want to hear it, because it has been associated with terrorism, horror, closure, and it has ended with evoking ISIS, Al Qaeda, and a negative semantic field in general. Thus, I consider that the effort to give due weight and to restore dignity to words is fundamental. I personally try to do it as much as I can, weighing the words a lot. I never write a post in five seconds, instead I can spend a whole hour on selecting the more appropriate terms. And when I employ some words and expressions that are normally associated with other concepts, instead of being used with their original meanings, I always try to explain them. I have consciously set myself this goal. Therefore, when I collaborate with schools and I meet the students, I constantly try to pursue it.

[C.S.]   Which relationship did you want to develop between the protagonist of the novel, an Italian woman who was born from Jordan Muslim parents, and the urban, social, and cultural environment of Milan?

[S.A.Q.]   I wanted to bring out the story of an Italian Muslim woman who lives in her time and space. On the one hand, I made the ef-

fort to describe Milanese roads, spaces, and locations. On the other, my aim was to narrate the existence of a Muslim woman, who is always seen as a foreign person – a foreign body – but actually socializes and even commits herself to doing useful actions. Generally, nobody notices women doing voluntary services, except for the narrow circle of people who collaborate with them, because these are perceived as invisible actions. As a result, according to the common perception there aren't any Muslim women involved in voluntary work. Instead, there are plenty of them! Just think of the current pandemic situation: women, more than men, are doing voluntary service by packing, delivering, accompanying the elderly, etc. To sum up, in my latest novel I have definitely tried to give a complete vision of the protagonist's life, even if I would have liked to develop it more – maybe in my next work this aspect will be examined in depth.

[C.S.]   The protagonist of your novel considers the choice of wearing the veil as a sign of emancipation. What stereotypes and prejudices did you want to bring out and deconstruct? What role can this story play in the development of a more conscious, inclusive, and plural vision of women in Italy?

[S.A.Q.]   I'll start by answering the latest question: what role does the story play? Indeed, it is aimed at deconstructing a certain common imagination and proposing a valid alternative. However, which is the problem connected to the deconstruction of specific stereotypes and prejudices regarding Muslim women, in particular? They aren't all stereotypes and prejudices! I mean, it can't be denied that submissive and oppressed Muslim women, on whom the veil is imposed, and who are victims of the patriarchal society's violence, do exist. The problem is that people generalise. As a result, this image becomes the representation of *all* Muslim women, and a general expression of Islam. But that isn't true! And this is the central point that I'm trying to deconstruct and to clarify in the novel. On the one hand, this kind of problem exists, in fact there are some characters that represent it. On the other, there are figures who try to oppose and to solve it on behalf of a different religious vision. Thus, which is the correct religious and interpretative dimension? It's the one that does good for mankind – I think it is natural to support this. The readers of my novel will certainly support Horra instead of siding with the 'uptight' characters or the man who beats his wife. In this way, they will be stimulated to realise that different types of Muslim people do exist. My purpose was exactly to short-circuit the 'certainties' that people have about Muslim men and, in particular, about Muslim women. Therefore, the assumption that wearing the veil is a rebellious and feminist act was born of a provocation. What does it mean? It means that there

actually are many Muslim women who can freely choose, without any obligation, to wear the veil as a part of their spiritual journey. And they do it also as a rebellious act against a more general standpoint that would like women to have different attitudes, or against the trend that obliges them to have perfect bodies to exhibit and to show off. I do believe in the feminist principle according to which women must be free to self-determine and to emancipate themselves. And self-determination and emancipation have a spiritual dimension as well. I can decide to deprive myself of something as an act of faith and a spiritual exercise. For example, during Ramadan I deprive myself of food after sunrise and before sunset by considering it as an exercise of will. Religions propose this often, since training our souls builds stronger personalities – of course when these choices are free! And I think that everybody has the right to decide independently, in order to search for their balance.

[C.S.] At the beginning of the novel you quoted the following sentence by Tina Anselmi: "Una donna che riesce, riesce per tutte le altre".[5] What are your wishes for the future of the Italian literary production by women writers?

[S.A.Q.] I hope that Italian literary production by women writers will be more and more influential and that the perception regarding their works will evolve positively. It seems that women can only write for a female audience, and actually their works are often more read by women than men. Indeed, their works convey a different, additional contribution of sensibility. Actually, there are many Italian women writers but it seems that they are numerically inferior to their male colleagues, and so their works are definitely less famous. Moreover, it looks as if women writers must only ever develop certain topics. But that isn't true: women can write about everything! So, I hope that they will become more and more flexible and transversal as regards content issues, since there are plenty of works dedicated to gender, feminism, political reflections regarding women participation in positions of responsibility, etc. Therefore, I really would like people to change their outlook on the literary production by women writers, since it is still considered 'peculiar', 'special', and almost not worthy of male reading, despite women authors' increasingly intense activity. Generally speaking, I wish that women could become more and more an integral part of the different dimensions (political, social, economical, etc.) that constitute our country without having to pay constant attention to quotas. I do really hope that their expertise will win, that is, that women will just be defined by their merits and capacities in doing something.

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5 'A woman who succeeds, succeeds for all the others' (transl. by the Author).

5 Conclusions

Both the teaching considerations and the key aspects of the interview support the use of literary works by Italian women writers of migrant origin for the teaching of Italian as an L2/FL.

Their multilingual and multicultural features foster the reconsideration of a frequently anachronistic, monolingual, and mono-cultural didactic proposal in favour of a more updated and intercultural one. Instead of representing languages and cultures as fixed systems, based on binary relationships of domination, these texts narrate linguistic and cultural evolution and mutual influence. As a result, they not only exhibit the coexistence between diverse traditions within the same country, providing the tools to understand the current Italian reality, but also invite participation in the construction of new intercultural communities.

These reflections fit into the wider issue of the literary canon, and advocate the inclusion of Italian literature by women writers of migrant origin for the teaching of Italian as an L2/FL in order both to introduce a gender insight into literary didactic proposals, and to reflect the dynamism of today's Italian socio-cultural system.

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