

## Italy in Postcolonial Discourse Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje, Nuruddin Farah

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**Abstract** In this essay, I would like to explore the representations of Italy through the eyes of three outstanding postcolonial writers: Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje and Nuruddin Farah. Even though Italy is an oasis of art and culture, Jhumpa Lahiri looks at it with a profound sense of both admiration and sadness in *Hema and Kaushik* (2008). Her scrutiny of the ancient, pre-imperial ruins of the Etruscan period leads her characters to question life, death and marital life. Similarly, Ondaatje opposes an Italian Renaissance villa to the debris left behind by war in his well-known *The English Patient* (1992). His Punjabi character Kirpal Singh mentions Gabicce Mare, a place that soon after World War II will become a memorial and cemetery for the Indian troops who fought and died for the liberation of Italy. This discourse is picked up by Helena Janaczeck, a Polish-Italian writer who combines a narrative on Polish migration in Italy with an elegiac narrative about the cemetery and memorial in Cassino, where a Maori goes to visit the tombs of his ancestor, who also participated with the Commonwealth troops in World War II. Nuruddin Farah too, who provides a reportage on Somali immigrants to Italy, seems to consider the country as a springboard either to other North European destinations or to a possible destiny back home. All three writers present Italy according to varied and unusual perspectives.

**Keywords** Lahiri. Ondaatje. Farah. Postcolonial Italy.

The aim of this essay is to examine how different the representations of Italy can be, if looked at through the eyes of three well-known Anglophone writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967), Michael Ondaatje (b. 1943) and Nuruddin Farah (b. 1945). They represent two generations and it is through this generation gap that Italy changes. This essay will highlight how these three authors transform Italy from a utopian paradise of art and culture (Lahiri and Ondaatje), into a space of ‘inbetweenness’, a “purgatory if not a real hell, for migrants” (Farah). All three writers, in spite of their cultural and linguistic differences and of their different geographical provenance, offer an original and personal perspective on Italy. Etruscan sarcophagi, remains of a pre-Imperial civilisation and history, accompany interrogations on ‘ways of dying’; war cemeteries and Commonwealth memorials remind the reader of Italy as the theatre of World War II. All these are not necessarily aspects of the country that we keep in our mind or remember.

To begin with, it is worth considering the unique authorial and personal experience of Jhumpa Lahiri, Pulitzer Prize winner in 2000 with her short

story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). It is well known that Lahiri chose Italy as her homeland for a while, after dedicating her life to the study of ancient and modern Italian art and culture and of the Italian language. Thus, the duality of motherland (West Bengal) and host land (the US) was somehow solved by means of a triadic structure that eventually included Italy as a third, alternative space (Dhingra, Cheung 2012). Jhumpa Lahiri, born in London, brought up in Massachusetts, lived in Rome for a few years with her husband and her children, who attended a local public school. She intently read and studied Italian literature. Lahiri now speaks and writes also in Italian. Moreover, she studied Latin and Renaissance Italian art, therefore by now she has a fairly vast and profound knowledge of this elective host country.

While presenting and discussing her latest novel (Lahiri 2013) in a public interview in Torino, Jhumpa Lahiri asserted that a triadic structure – in fact, the classical love triangle – had eventually helped her bring the plot to a solution. She was more evasive when answering a question about the geographical triad that is also present in the novel, which allows the female protagonist to travel from Calcutta to Rhode Island, and then to California, thus denying a possible circular journey, or odyssey, back home.

A similar pattern is to be found in her novella “Hema and Kaushik”. This three-chapter novella occupies the second part of her collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (Lahiri 2008, 221-333). “Hema and Kaushik” seems to follow a stereotyped pattern that definitely sets the story within the genre of ‘love among the ruins’. Lahiri seems to affiliate herself to a well-established British tradition that goes from Robert Browning’s poem (1855), which celebrates love among the poor remains of a powerful Empire, to Edward Burne-Jones’s well-known painting with the same title *Love Among the Ruins* (1894), to a whole series of short stories and novels pivoting round the Grand Tour cliché, taking place either in Italy or in Greece, by Victorian and Modernist English writers. In Lahiri’s novella, the passionate love story between the two young protagonists develops over just a few days, between Rome and Volterra, within a landscape of archaeological ruins.

Similarly to what happens in the plot of her well-known novel *The Namesake* (Lahiri 2007), the novella literalizes what was already announced there. That is, the necessity of or the search for a geo-physical third space: to Lahiri’s Bengali characters Italy is the second best choice after fleeing from the States. In an interview the author claims that the source of inspiration for this story was Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Marble Faun* (1860), whose setting is Rome and whose protagonists are four artists.

Thus, in the novella, the temporary migration of the Indian female protagonist, Hema, a would-be writer and academic, from the US East Coast to Rome, anticipates the same trajectory by Lahiri herself, who by now has a successful career. Right before her imminent arranged marriage

with Navin in Calcutta, and after the break up with Julian, a married man, Hema meets Kaushick in Rome, by chance. Now a war reporter, he is still the fascinating boy she used to know in her childhood days.

In a Rome that is an elusive rather than a real city, the two young protagonists immediately fall in love. Rome's climate feels 'languorous' and mild (Lahiri 2008, 295), where open-air restaurants are full still in November. The local food and wine are appreciated. But, most importantly, in the so-called 'eternal city', Hema is free to live only in the present: "Now she was free of both of them, free of her past and free of her future in a place where so many different times stood cheek by jowl like guests at a crowded party" (Lahiri 2008, 299).

Hema is well aware that to her Rome is not exactly a real city, but that she is just a tourist there and does not fully belong to it:

Certain elements of Rome reminded her of Calcutta: the grand weathered buildings, the palm trees, the impossibility of crossing the main streets. Like Calcutta, which she'd visited throughout childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all – a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay. She knew the ancient language of Rome, its rulers and writers, its history from founding to collapse. But she was a tourist in everyday Italy, [...] she didn't have a single Roman friend. (Lahiri 2008, 299)

The assimilation of Rome to Calcutta is an objective reference to the real city, to its Mediterranean vegetation of impressive and pervasive palm trees, to its majestic yet decadent buildings, and to its chaotic streets. This image of Rome makes it resemble the big metropolis of the global South, and it is almost in tune with a vision of how Euro-America is evolving towards Africa, as Jean and John Comaroff would put it (J. Comaroff, L. Comaroff 2012). In an interview Lahiri claims that Rome and Calcutta are similar, as cousins might be.<sup>1</sup>

1 "Credo che Roma e Calcutta abbiano in comune una specie di energia e anche un modo di vivere. I loro abitanti sono passionali e orgogliosi della loro città. Entrambe le città, poi, hanno una reputazione speciale: sono luoghi intensi, travolgenti, forse indecifrabili. Ospitano quasi tutto il mondo e tutti vogliono andarci per trovare qualche cosa. Esteriormente ho l'impressione che Roma sia una versione di Calcutta, come se fossero cugine. Ogni settimana, mentre i miei figli sono a lezione di pianoforte, faccio una passeggiata a Trastevere, dalle parti di Via della luce e Via della Lungara, e ogni volta la passeggiata mi ricorda un aspetto di Calcutta. Per esempio, sebbene sia sempre circondata dal rumore e dal movimento, c'è anche molta tranquillità, perché sono circondata da vie strette e nascoste. Nell'atmosfera poi percepisco l'assenza di qualche cosa, come l'ombra di un altro tempo. sento lo stesso a Calcutta, lo stesso contrasto, come un dialogo fra il passato e il presente" (Antonelli 2015).

Somehow, the description of Rome we find in the novella seems to obliterate some people:

Saturday mornings, instead of working, she would go to the Campo de' Fiori, watching the stylish mothers in their high heels and jewels and quilted jackets pushing strollers and buying vegetables by the kilo. These women, with their rich, loose tangles of hair, their sunglasses concealing no wrinkles, were younger than Hema. (Lahiri 2008, 301)

Here Hema seems to direct her gaze towards what she already knows, that is, to a certain upper class lifestyle, thus obliterating other types of reality, never allowing her gaze to reach down the social ladder. The street market people become invisible, even if there must be women among them, too.

In spite of that, Lahiri admits that her permanence in Rome has allowed her to meet the migrants, particularly Bangladeshi, to talk to them and share the news of Bangladeshi newspapers with them.<sup>2</sup>

The reason for the erasure mentioned above, however, is that Hema allows herself the status of a tourist, while conjuring images of her future self, her imminence of wifhood and motherhood, since she is about to get married. All that explains why she is attracted to a particular site, when visiting Villa Giulia:

Looking at the giant sarcophagus of the bride and groom enclosed in a box of glass, she found herself in tears. She couldn't help but think of Navin. Like the young smiling couple sitting affectionately on top of a shared casket, there was something dead about the marriage she was about to enter into. (Lahiri 2008, 301)

The sarcophagus clearly represents the possibility of eternal love as seen by Etruscan art. Yet, it also hints at love and death, at the temporariness, if not at the precariousness of life.

Hema and Kaushik spend the rest of their holidays in Rome together, visiting museums and archaeological sites. They decide to travel northwards, to Volterra, in Tuscany, an "austere, forbidding, solitary place" (Lahiri 2008, 318). Here they visit the Guarnacci Etruscan Museum, where

there was another sarcophagus of a husband and wife. But they were nothing like the languid, loving pair Hema had seen in Rome. Here they were older, cruder, still bristling after years of marriage, ill at ease (Lahiri 2008, 320).

2 "Vedo più immigrati, soprattutto dal Bangladesh. Sono molto interessata alla loro presenza qui a Roma perché, conoscendo il bengalese, posso parlare con loro e provare a capire come vivono, quale è la loro posizione in Italia" (Antonelli 2015).

The previous idealisation of married life leaves space for a different image, a kind of second thought, or a possible different version of the story Hema tells herself about her future husband, and about her own marriage: "And though she knew it had every chance, over the years, of coming to life, she was conscious only of its deadness" (Lahiri 2008, 301). Rather than an opposition between life and death, or love and death, even of love and its death, one should retrieve a certain pattern that was already present in the novel *The Namesake*, to which the novella is strongly indebted.

First of all, Hema expresses the same positive judgment on modern arranged marriages, which are a way or a chance to learn to love one's partner over the years as one of the 'practices of everyday life' (De Certeau 1984), for a modern woman with Indian origins. Second, Lahiri seems to worry about ways of dying, rather than ways of living. As if for a migrant, assimilation, adaptation and integration were less important than the manners of one's own death and burial. Already in *The Namesake*, the protagonist, Gogol, is often disturbed by the sight of cemeteries and burial grounds. To him, to be American, like his white fiancé Maxine, means knowing one's family's burial ground, one's final (pre)destination. To him, as a migrant, even a second generation Bengali-American, ways of dying and burial ceremonies remain obscure, unpredictable, uncertain and above all unlocalised. Similarly, Hema and Kaushik reflect on this same issue, while overlooking some employees during their lunch break:

- They have lived here, in each other's company, all their lives. They will die here.
  - I envy them that, Hema said.
  - Do you?
  - I've never belonged to any place that way.
- Kaushik laughed. - You're complaining to the wrong person.  
(Lahiri 2008, 321)

Actually, Kaushik will soon die in Thai because of a Tsunami, after leaving Rome, after leaving Hema to her destiny. Separation and death conclude the plot, thus precluding a happy ending, which is always avoided by Lahiri, even in her shorter fiction.

This utopian, idealised and elusive Rome becomes a third space, as Homi Bhabha has defined it (Bhabha 1994), or literally "a purgatory" as Lahiri admits, where dichotomies disappear, where India and the States recede into the background, and new mature identities take shape.

Now that Lahiri has tasted Roman citizenship, her autobiographical narrative *In altre parole* (Lahiri 2015) enriches her discourse on Italy. She had the opportunity to live in the country she loves and she knows both from her studies and from her previous visits. She has strenuously learned Italian both through formal lessons and through reading a vast canon of Italian

literature. Surprisingly and courageously, she has positioned herself in the humble place of an apprentice who struggles to master a foreign language.

The language sounds familiar to her, yet it resists her. It must be said that, having Bengali in her mind and therefore the Sanskrit roots of the language, Italian might sound familiar because of its syllabic morphology and because of its vowel sounds. Moreover, having studied Greek, Latin<sup>3</sup> and Italian architecture and art, Lahiri had already exposed herself to a conspicuous amount of lexicon borrowed from classical languages by the English language, and juxtaposed to the Anglo-Saxon lexicon. Finally, much architectural, artistic and musical lexis is Italian.

Lahiri explains how difficult it is for her to acquire literary self-confidence within this new language. While reading Moravia, Pavese, Vittorini, Carlotto and the poets Quasimodo and Saba,<sup>4</sup> among others, she obsessively and diligently gathers words upon words in her notebooks. She writes that living/writing in another language is like swimming for the first time across a lake, or it is like walking on bridges in Venice to avoid water or, even, it is like putting on someone else's pullover by mistake: just like yours, yet not quite.

The psycholinguistic aspect of Lahiri's life in Italy is quite interesting. She claims to write from the margins, using a metaphor that is well-known in postcolonial studies, as an existential condition that haunts her wherever she goes: "Scrivo ai margini, così come vivo da sempre ai margini dei Paesi, delle culture" (Lahiri 2015, 75). Even more poignantly, she admits, this condition of 'marginality' derives from her early and original uprooting from Bengal, first to reach the States, and later Italy. This on-going displacement causes her a sense of inadequacy and incompleteness.<sup>5</sup>

She then adds that, due to her appearance and her name, in America people assumed she could not master the language. Similarly, in Italy people addressed her more easily in English than in Italian and she sees

3 A commentator refers to her "latinate word choice" (Hadley 2016).

4 "Ho letto i romanzi di Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, Italo Calvino e Cesare Pavese, e anche qualcosa di Elena Ferrante e Alessandro Baricco. Ho un'antologia della poesia del ventesimo secolo, che contiene, tra gli altri, i versi di Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti e Umberto Saba. Di recente ho avuto il piacere di conoscere Patrizia Cavalli, quindi sto leggendo uno dei suoi libri. E mi fa sempre piacere leggere i libri dei miei amici italiani: *L'America non esiste*, di Antonio Monda, e *Casa Rossa* di Francesca Marciano" (Antonelli 2015).

5 "Per colpa della mia identità divisa, per colpa, forse, del mio carattere, mi considero una persona incompiuta, in qualche modo manchevole. Può darsi che ci sia una causa linguistica: la mancanza di una lingua con cui possa identificarmi. Da ragazzina, in America, provavo a parlare il Bengalese alla perfezione, senza alcun accento straniero, per accontentare i miei genitori, soprattutto per sentirmi completamente figlia loro. Ma non era possibile, D'altro canto volevo essere considerata un'americana, ma nonostante parlassi quella lingua perfettamente, non era possibile neanche quello. Ero sospesa anziché radicata. Avevo due lati, entrambi imprecise" (Lahiri 2015, 86).

that as a personal defeat. Lahiri is accustomed to analysing herself and reality without indulgence. Maybe, she does not take into account a certain narcissistic and histrionic attitude Italians manifest as soon as they detect a slightly foreign intonation.

Going back to her analytical attitude, she sees herself in terms of a metaphor that is very common in postcolonial theory, that is, being an exile, a nomad, without a motherland/mother tongue, exiled from exile itself.<sup>6</sup>

More poignantly, she has recourse to the figure of the triangle again, coming, so to speak, full circle back. The triangle, thus, becomes a figure of speech as well as a geometric/geographical representation of Homi Bhabha's third space. In her chapter entitled "The Triangle", Lahiri says that she was born in Bengali, but she grew up in an English language educational environment, from kindergarten onwards. In her words, Bengali receded, while English took power, when she started reading at the age of six or seven. Then she adopted Italian, in her maturity, in her twenties, as a way out, creating a triadic and triangular psycholinguistic space all of her own.<sup>7</sup> It is here necessary to admit that the third space in Homi Bhabha's theory is a space of hybridity. It acquires here a slightly different meaning, more literal: a third direction, a third way, a way out.

Now Lahiri is at home in the Italian language and her Italian work has been published, first as a series of short narratives in the weekly magazine *L'internazionale*, later as a book by the same publisher that has so far published her novels in translation: Guanda. It is also possible that she will become a translator of the Italian writers she appreciates the most. Her Italian work has been translated by the much acclaimed Ann Goldstein, editor of *The New Yorker*, who has been highly appreciated in Italy as well as internationally for her titanic and extremely accurate and sensitive English translation and editing of Primo Levi's complete works.

Lahiri is not only a writer, she is a researcher, a committed reader and a refined interpreter of Italian artistic, literary and cultural productions.

6 "Chi non appartiene a nessun posto specifico non può tornare, in realtà, da nessuna parte. I concetti di esilio e di ritorno implicano un punto di origine, una patria. Senza una patria e senza una vera lingua madre, io vago per il mondo, anche dalla mia scrivania. Alla fine mi accorgo che non è stato un vero esilio, tutt'altro. Sono esiliata perfino dalla definizione di esilio" (Lahiri 2015, 100).

7 "Il triangolo. [...] Il primo idioma della mia vita è stato il Bengalese, tramandato dai miei genitori a me. [...] Il mio primo incontro con l'inglese è stato duro, sgradevole: quando sono stata mandata all'asilo sono rimasta traumatizzata. [...] Qualche anno dopo, però, il Bengalese ha fatto un passo indietro, quando sono diventata una lettrice. Avevo sei o sette anni. Da allora la mia lingua madre non è stata più capace, da sola, di crescermi. In un certo senso è morta. È arrivato l'inglese, una matrigna. [...] La parte di me che parlava inglese, che andava a scuola, che leggeva e scriveva, era un'altra persona. [...] Ho dovuto giostrarmi tra queste due lingue finché, a circa venticinque anni, non ho scoperto l'italiano. [...] L'arrivo dell'italiano, il terzo punto sul mio percorso linguistico, crea un triangolo. Crea una forma anziché una linea retta" (Lahiri 2015, 113).

Her choice of living in the area of the Ghetto in Rome, her taste for ancient architecture and archaeology, her deep knowledge of the country, are much more than simple 'scaffolding', as she claims, no matter how many little mistakes she might make, or new words she might create, no matter whether her sentences are short and paratactic as in English. She has now successfully and convincingly 'metamorphosed' and 'translated' herself into an Italian author.

The second exemplary case study is Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992), which gained him the Booker Prize, and which was adapted into an extremely successful film.<sup>8</sup> It also represents Italy as the utopian space where art and culture – books, paintings, frescoes, sculptures, Renaissance villas and small villages – can heal the wounds of a group of international soldiers and spies who have been affected and psychologically damaged by World War II.

Canadian Hana and Italian Caravaggio, Hungarian Almasy and Punjabi Kirpal Singh find themselves entrapped in a villa in Tuscany, where a library and a piano are signs of a life dedicated to culture, in a countryside rich in small villages with their little churches made precious by beautiful frescoes. This aspect of the novel – the praise of Italian Renaissance art – has been thoroughly examined by critics, and commented on by the author himself. In contrast, one aspect that is almost unnoticeable in the novel is the mentioning of Gabicce Mare by Kip, the Sikh character who witnessed there a silent and touching religious procession by night during the war, under the risk of German bombings. As Gabicce Mare is the site of one of the cemeteries of the Commonwealth Army in Italy, the fact that Kip comes all the way from India to visit the place that will become a site of commemoration for the international force that took part in the War with Britain and the US is highly symbolic. Lahore, Kip's hometown, is on the verge of becoming a Pakistani city, while Gabicce Mare becomes the burial ground for Indian soldiers. These two geographical locations are connected by a cause and effect chain, due to the participation of India in World War II. The no-longer-Indian and not-yet-Pakistani soldiers do not know that what they are dying for at the Italian front is not only independence and decolonisation, but tribal and communal riots, slaughtering and massacres, in one word: Partition.

Thus, the lyric description of Gabicce's religious rituals by Ondaatje endows the place of an almost sacred aura as a way of celebrating the deaths of the soldiers of the Commonwealth Army. More recently, the Polish-Italian writer Helena Janaczeck, born in Germany to a Jewish family and now living and working in Italy, tackles this same theme of com-

8 *The English Patient* (USA 1996). Director: Anthony Minghella; writers: Michael Ondaatje (novel), Anthony Minghella (screenplay); stars: Ralph Fiennes, Juliette Binoche, Willem Dafoe.



memoration. Her moving novel, memoir, reportage, historical chronicle, *Le rondini di Montecassino* (Janaczeck 2010), pivots around the War memorial and cemetery there. If Ondaatje has the merit of reminding us, Italians, of the Indian contingent fighting for our liberation, Janaczeck reminds us of the Polish, the Maori, the Nepali Gurkha, the Indian, the Moroccan, and the South African contingents: soldiers who were fighting in Italy, and then regained full citizenship – after years of colonisation – over their own ancestral lands once they went back home, thanks to decolonisation processes that started in various ex-colonial countries. Their sacrifice had also helped the survivors to rebuild Europe. Janaczeck manages to intertwine the chronicles of the Jewish persecution and diaspora from Russia to Germany to the Middle East all through the War years with the mobilisation and convergence of Commonwealth troops from far away towards Montecassino. This planetary movements of peoples and troops is encompassed in her passionate and moving novel. She does not forget the migrants, who more recently moved from Poland to Italy in search of better working opportunity, particularly young women allured by the world of cinema, television and the show business in general, soon to be disillusioned.

Janaczeck's work maps the cemetery of Montecassino for us. In spite of the fact that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists among its rules that all the tombs should be uniform and that there should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed, Janaczeck uses irony to claim that while British soldiers were allotted the central area of the Montecassino cemetery, the blacks, Indians, Maoris and others were put to the margins and their tombs are very difficult to locate. She speaks of ghettos for the dead that resemble the ghettos for the living, of the hierarchies of the cemetery. She claims, through the voice of a Maori visitor, that the Memorial is classist and racist but, above all, it is all wrong, for Hindu tombs are not easily visible, while there are hundreds of them. The cemetery seems to show that most of the dead were British, but a large number of Indians and Maori died at Montecassino, too.

The contrasting views of Italy present in this novel show it as an arena of sacrifice and racism, but also of liberation and hospitality. Even today, all these aspects place this country among the paradoxical and controversial Mediterranean frontiers. As a sad note to update this view, it must be said that Italy is becoming more and more a land of camps. Refugee camps are proliferating for all those migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who are stopped at frontiers, rejected by bordering countries, not allowed to (re) join their families or acquaintances abroad.

This reality is closer to the view provided by the third author here examined: the Somali writer now exiled in South Africa, Nuruddin Farah, who has been awarded the Prize for Reportage in 2006. Farah's permanence in Italy was not an idyll or a real choice. Born in Baidoa, the Italian-adminis-

tered region of Southern Somalia, he had been blocked once in Rome on his way back to Mogadishu by his brother's phone call, announcing that the authorities saw him as an undesirable presence. Since he was an exile, Farah was constantly receiving visits by thugs or spies. Thus, he left Italy as soon as he could.

After that experience, he wrote the novel *Sardines* (1981) where the young protagonist is a swimmer in the Somali national league, training for the next international competition to be held in Rome. Actually, she is hiding the secret determination, once in Rome, to quit her national team and ask for asylum in Italy. In the years of the cold War, when abroad for international competitions, some athletes from the ex-Soviet Union and from ex-communist countries actually asked for asylum and for the status of refugees in western countries.

Farah explores a similar situation, having a young woman fleeing from a so-called Socialist country to reach Italy. In fact she is fleeing from the dictatorship of Siad Barre (1969-1991), which in the eyes of Italian intellectuals had created a model and 'an exemplary case' in Africa.

On the occasion of a second visit in the nineties, Farah managed to interview Somalis who were living in Italy (Farah 2000). Interestingly enough, Italy is only a sort of waiting room, a sort of third space, not so much a third space of hybridity, but a purgatory between the hell of the civil war and the heaven of a future elsewhere, mainly in North America and Canada. Italy is not a hospitable country, since it never allows full citizenship. It is not a place where to plan one's future.

Farah interviewed traffickers, who managed to bring Somalis from Nigeria to Rome, because - they claimed - Italy was a corrupt country and anyone was corruptible. Among the various people he met, two figures captured Farah's attention as a novelist. The first is a woman, Caaliya Muxummad, who has a strong and determined temperament. She had been the director of a high school back in Mogadishu, and now works as a governess with an Italian family and earns enough money to buy a passage for all her brothers and sisters first from Somalia to Italy and then from Italy to North America. She shares her small apartment with five young men who, in spite of their good health and young age, do not work: they are unskilled, uneducated and unemployed. She is their only support, and yet she is in command of her own life. For her and for many Somali women working as nurses or carers (*badanti*), Italy is a country that fosters women's emancipation, while men fall easily into inactivity and into depression.

This type of woman seems to be embodied by Dunya, the protagonist in the novel *Gifts* (Farah 1993), an independent nurse in Mogadishu and a widow, who works hard and manages to keep control over her family. The second figure that strikes Farah is a doctoral student in Medicine, Mohammed Abucar Gacal, who studies in Italy and dreams of going back

to Somalia one day to do something useful for his country. He is the only young man who appreciates Italy as a place where to improve one's professional skills and he might be the model for Bosaso in the same novel.

In *Gifts* Italy plays an important role and shows two faces: it is the land from which Dunya's brother sends money, remittances, together with the latest technological gadgets for her children, for instance a brand new Walkman and the video tape of the film *ET*, Levi jeans and denim shirts. Thus, Italy seems a sort of huge shopping mall. No longer the centre of elegance and fashion industry, which was represented by the *bella vita* hedonistic philosophy, it is more a commercial and globalised market. Italy is not necessarily the producer of technological goods, but it is a place where these global gadgets and transnational pieces of clothing can easily transit, or can be purchased and dispatched anywhere. This image of Italy confirms that the flows of goods normally travel from the North of the planet to the South, since consumerism creates new needs and desires in the countries of the South. On the contrary a flux of people travel from the South to the North, certainly in search of a better life, but also partly because of the mirage of a consumer society and of commodities at hand (Appadurai 1996).

Italy is one among many international agents promoting assistance to Somalia, of a very ambiguous type. For instance a piece of news pasted at the end of a chapter anonymously reports:

An Italian government Aid Protocol was signed the day before yesterday [...]. In this connection the Italian government has promised to increase the number of professors on secondment from Italian institutions of higher learning to the National University of Somalia. The Somali university is the only one outside Italy where all subjects are taught in Italian. As part of this programme, Italian scholars of Somali are helping their counterparts to complete an Italian-Somali dictionary. (Farah 1993, 100)

This piece of news that breaks through the narrative, with its neutral tone and its objectivity, is not accompanied by comments. Neither positive nor negative evaluation is passed on this protocol. However, if we read Farah's interviews to Somalis in Italy, we immediately perceive the hypocrisy behind projects of this type. Somalis are never allowed entrance into the country, in spite of those reciprocal cooperation projects.

Newspaper articles are quoted where Italy is associated with other western countries in the European Union or even the States. Italy is criticised and attacked for sending to Somalia items that are really superfluous in the hot climate of the region and do not respond to the real needs of the population. Italian philanthropic international policy seems completely hypocritical and misled.

These articles are signed by Taariq, Dunya's ex husband, now a journalist. He speaks in the first person ("If I could afford to be cynical [...] Am I stretching the point?", Farah 1993, 198), and more explicitly accuses western countries, among which Italy, of hiding vested interests behind their donations of food and medicines, which are given away only to produce dependence and enlarge a market of possible future buyers.

However, in the end, Bosaso and Abshir, respectively Dunya's new fiancé and brother, share their happy recollections of life in Rome: an international city, with people of various origins working at FAO. The only reproach to the Italian colonial policy is an ironic comment on the rules for waiters in whites-only clubs and restaurants:

We weren't allowed to go anywhere near Croce del Sud in the fifties, when the Italians were the master race here. Nor were the waiters allowed to wear shoes. "Why do Italians believe they are the ones who taught Somalis to wear shoes, as if the whole venture of their so-called higher civilization comprised a gimmicky habit of a pair of feet covering objects?" (Farah 1993, 235)

Quite meaningfully, Dunya and Bosaso build their new life in Mogadishu, and Bosaso is one among a few characters who have been abroad and have come back home to promote new models of life, more modern, maybe westernised, yet aimed at improving life, social and political conditions in Somalia, not in Italy.

To Lahiri it is pre-Roman Italy that provides a model for family life and the institution of marriage, but it also allows her meditations on death. To Lahiri Italy has an existential resonance and it is a place where a Cosmopolitan intellectual can easily find 'a room of one's own'. To Ondaatje Italy is the cradle of Renaissance and Humanistic culture and these values provide a potent counter discourse to War and its destructiveness. It is not surprising that to Farah Italy is a route from the countries of the South to an elsewhere that is difficult to reach. It is one among many capitalist western countries, participating in international aid projects, in a free market, sharing and dispatching technical and administrative skills, but it is not a place where to stay and establish roots for postcolonial migrants.

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