

# IGIABA SCEGO IN THE ITALIAN POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

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## IGIABA SCEGO IN THE ITALIAN POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

### Summary

*This paper presents an analysis of selected works of Igiaba Scego, an Italian Somali writer. The selected works are the novels Oltre Babilonia, Adua and La mia casa è dove sono, in which it is discussed the subject of Italian colonialism in Somalia and the postcolonial period, in Italy and in Somalia. Through the postcolonial approach, the analysis shows the importance of the selected works in the denaturalization of colonial myth and stereotypes about Black people created by the colonial discourse. The value of these works, from a postcolonial point of view, becomes greater, if one takes into account that in Italy there was no great discussion of its colonial past. In addition, the analysis deals with the problem of rejection of identities of origin for the influence of colonial discourse that negatively evaluates them. The analysis also includes the problem of new hybrid identities that do not satisfy the criteria of fixed identities and therefore reveal the historicity and the artificiality of these identities that are no longer adequate in the globalized world of today.*

**Keywords:** Hybrid Identity, Italian Colonialism, Postcolonial Approach, Selected Works of Igiaba Scego

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, every society includes various groups of people who are marginalized for different reasons. Immigrants from former European colonies in Africa represent one of the discriminated groups. European colonialism is not a finished historical period because its traces and its influence are still present today and can be seen in the topicality of structural discrimination and in micro situations. Italy, as a former colonizer country, is special in the sense of silence and denial of colonial past (Mihaljević and Carić, 2019: 79). Therefore, the role of postcolonial literature becomes more important. Postcolonial literature does not refer to literature after colonialism in a chronological sense, but to literature whose starting point is colonialism, seen as obligatory for any postcolonial history anywhere in the globe

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a reduced and revised version of the thesis (mentor dr.sc. Nikolina Gunjević-Kosanović) defended at the Department of Italian Studies, University of Zadar (2018). Since the thesis is written in Italian language, the author of this paper is translating the needed quotations.

(Mellino, 2005: 51). Igiaba Scego is one of the African-Italian postcolonial writers whose personal history is linked to Somalia, a former Italian colony (De Vivo, 2010/2011: 6), and her novels discuss the colonial period in Somalia, but also the relationship between Italy and Somalia, from the collapse of colonialism until today.

In this paper, three selected novels by Igiaba Scego (*Oltre Babilonia*, *Adua* and *La mia casa è dove sono*)<sup>2</sup> will be analyzed, whose themes are linked to the period of Italian colonialism. These novels offer another point of view from the predominantly European one and give voice to the subalterns, that is to the colonized people. Alongside the denaturalization of the colonial discourse, Scego, as the representative of the second generation, deals with the problem of hybrid identity, which is opposed to fixed national identity. In other words, she addresses the suspense of the second generation between the two worlds and the problem of their precise definition (Mihaljević and Carić, 2019: 23). The purpose of the paper is to describe the stereotypes created by colonial discourse, show their relevance and define how they influence the identity of Somalis, immigrants and the second generation in Italy.

## OLTRE BABILONIA

In Scego's novel *Oltre Babilonia* the history of Italian colonization is the starting point, that is, the only possible past (Mellino, 2005: 51) necessary to understand the history of the colonized Somalis, the first generations of immigrants and the second generation. First of all, she offers a critique of the (past and recent) work of the Italian government in colonial Somalia and of the current state: the dictatorship of Said Barre and the civil war (Groppaldi, 2015: 68). Scego presents Italian colonialism in its most extreme aspects, describing its acts of brutality and violence against the Somali people. The cruelest story refers to the description of the collective rape of a group of Somalis by the fascist and German military for a bet:

Famey e il cugino subirono la stessa sorte. Lei fu presa da tre uomini diversi. Due italiani e un tedesco. Col primo si sgolò, scaliò, morse, cercando di divincolarsi. Col secondo non fece più nulla, perché atterrita dalle grida del cugino. Lei sapeva bene che quelle cose accadevano alle donne. Ma com'era possibile che succedessero anche ai maschi? Lei credeva che gli uomini potessero annichilirli con le pallottole, non con il cazzo (Scego 2008: 69).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to highlight that Scego's complete bibliography in some way discusses the (post)colonial period, but due to the format of this paper it is not possible to include all novels.

<sup>3</sup> "Famey and his cousin suffered the same fate. She was raped by three different men. Two Italians and a German. With the first she disengaged, kicked, bit, trying to wriggle away. With the second she did nothing anymore, because she was terrified by the cries of her cousin. She knew well that those things happened to

Through different female characters and their stories, Igiaba gives the opportunity to subalterns, colonized women, to express their experience of Italian colonialism. Mar's character discusses the nineteenth-century practice of zoos with the inhabitants of the Afro-Asian colonies and the position of women in the colonies. At that time, a woman was reduced to something that was useful to the colonizers, to "[...] una schiava senza valore che deve dare il suo corpo quando il maschio bianco ha voglia carnale"<sup>4</sup> (ibid. 393). There was created a stereotype of African women as always ready for sexual intercourse with the colonists.

The Italians are responsible not only for economic colonialism, but also symbolic, whose example is the perception of a Somali of the construction of the Catholic cathedral in Mogadishu. It is the manifestation of the opposition between the West and the Other, in terms of Christianity and Islam. Therefore, this cathedral symbolizes the domination of the Italians and the subaltern position of the Somalis: "Un monumento grande e fastidioso quella cattedrale. Quelle due torri che si erigevano sfacciate verso il cielo. «Una grande erezione» così l'aveva definita il suo collega Yousuf, la grande erezione fascista. [...] la cattedrale era guardata con un certo fastidio, nessuno pensava di costruirla in armonia con gli edifici circostanti"<sup>5</sup> (Scego 2008: 320). Nowadays, in Italy, Somalis "experience alienation on two fronts: on the one hand, they are not seen as white in a society that is commonly imaged as white and, on the other, they are regarded with suspicion for being Muslim" (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 86).

Scego discusses about the period after the collapse of fascism. The character Maryam describes the period after World War II, which actually brought new types of colonialism: "Quindi dopo quella grande guerra, la seconda, il Nord grasso aveva detto al Sud povero fa' pure quello che vuoi, io non ti ostacolerò. Però non era proprio così. Erano ancora loro a decidere chi doveva essere liberato, in che tempi e con quali modalità. La Somalia sotto tutela."<sup>6</sup> (Scego, 2008: 114). Somalia's fate was ruled by the United Nations, which decided to give the task to Italy, "[...] un paese uscito con le ossa rotte da un regime fascista ventennale e da una guerra mondiale, che aveva perso la guerra e anche un mucchio di denaro, un paese distrutto nell'animo [...]"<sup>7</sup> (ibid. 259),

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women. But how was it possible that they also happened to males? She believed that men could annihilate them with bullets, not with cock."

<sup>4</sup> "[...] a worthless slave who must give her body when the white male wants sex."

<sup>5</sup> "A great and irritating monument that cathedral. Those two towers that shamelessly stood towards the sky. "A great erection" as his colleague Yousuf had called it, the great fascist erection [...] the cathedral was looked at with a certain irritation, nobody thought of building it in harmony with the surrounding buildings."

<sup>6</sup> "So after the Great war, the Second war, the rich North had said to the poor South do whatever you want, I will not hinder you. But it wasn't quite like that. They were still the ones to decide who was to be freed, in what time and in what ways. Somalia under protection."

<sup>7</sup> "[...] a country that came out of a fascist regime after twenty years, and a world war, a country which had lost the war and also a lot of money, a country destroyed in the soul [...]"

to guide Somalia towards independence and democracy. Maryam indicates that after the Second World War, Italy continued to produce the discourses that presented the Italians as *brava gente*<sup>8</sup>, noting: „Le riviste neocoloniali – Africana, Oltremare, Riconquista – fecero numeri speciali dove si esaltava, al solito, il ruolo civilizzatore della stirpe italiana”<sup>9</sup>(ibid. 260). During the period of the Italian trusteeship in Somalia, the Italians did nothing; they only imported the practice of corruption. It is important that Maryam also mentions that the future dictator Said Barre was trained by the Italian secret services (ibid. 262). In sum, Italy's role in the political situation in Somalia does not end with the collapse of Italian colonialism, but continues in several more refined ways.

This entire historical period of Somalia, in which Italy had played a great role, influenced the lives of Somalis in various ways, so some were affected by war and violence or by economic or political migrations, but even today it influences the lives of Somalis or the second generation diaspora living in Italy. Orientalism, which is based on the cultural representations of Africa as barbaric, primitive and fanatic (Mellino, 2005: 45), has led to racism and the superior sense of Europeans and is still very actual, which is evident in various types of discrimination of immigrants. Many examples of racism and discrimination in micro situations are described in this novel. Zuhra mentions the police problem that first suspects a Black person of having committed a crime and points out that the skin color is enough to be suspicious: “Ci vuole niente a essere scambiati per pericolosi sovversivi. Un attimo per diventare un terrorista. Basta una barba, uno straccio addosso, un'idea in testa. Poi se sei nero, sei sempre il primo sospettato.”<sup>10</sup> (Scego, 2008: 14). This police behavior has its root precisely in the cultural representations of Africans as barbarians which have produced the stereotype of Black people as deviant, while White people, who represent Europeans, are perceived as superior and progressive. In the story of the Mar there is an episode, which happened in elementary school, which indicates several elements that are connected with the colonial discourse:

«Perché sei nera, se tua mamma è bianca?».  
 [...] «E poi quei capelli sono brutti, sai?».  
 «Dici?».  
 «Bruttissimi, Mar. Brutti come la cacca».  
 «Dici che sono una cacca? »  
 «Tu sei nera. Negra come gli africani».  
 «Cosa sono gli africani?».  
 «Sono dei poveri. Non hanno neppure le scarpe ai piedi».  
 «Ma io ce le ho le scarpe. E ho anche le calze».

<sup>8</sup> Good people

<sup>9</sup> “The neo-colonial magazines - Africana, Oltremare, Riconquista - made special numbers in which was glorified, as usual, the civilizing role of the Italian lineage.”

<sup>10</sup> “It takes nothing to be mistaken for dangerous subversives. A moment to become a terrorist. All you need is a beard, a rag on you, an idea in your head. Then if you're black, you're always the prime suspect.”

«Ma quando tua madre ti ha trovato non ce l'avevi... eri nuda. Tua madre è bianca, ha i soldi, ti ha comprato le scarpe. E anche le calze ti ha comprato» (ibid. 123).<sup>11</sup>

From this conversation between Mar and a schoolmate, it is possible to detect the Eurocentric ideals of beauty, the stereotype of hungry and naked Africans in need of European help, the discourse of the civilizing role of Europeans in Africa and the stereotype that an Italian cannot be a Black person. In other words, one of the characteristics of "Italianism" would be to coincide with a white skin color that becomes a norm and this perception is the consequence of the sediment of colonial racism (Camilotti, 2014: 2).

Furthermore, Scego discusses the problem of the identity of the second generation. The process of identity construction and identity insecurity are more explicitly expressed through the characters of Zuhra and Mar, that is, the young women of the second generation of immigrants. Their conflict is not between the two cultures, but between the void of identity and the multiple identities (Kleinert, 2012: 206), which brings to light the problem of inadequacy of fixed or absolute national identities. As already mentioned, in Italian society there is a stereotype that all Black people are immigrants from Africa and that they are not citizens of the Italian Republic. In other words, only a fixed national identity is accepted, that corresponds with the color of the skin. Zuhra's character contrasts with this stereotype, saying: "Non conosco l'Africa. E dire che mi scorre sangue negro nelle vene. E che ci sono nata. Ma non è come conoscerla, in fondo. Non è proprio la stessa cosa. [...] io quindi in Africa ci sono nata e basta"<sup>12</sup> (Scego, 2008: 35). Zuhra does not accept the identity that is imposed on her by society, she does not feel really African and not even Italian. Therefore, she builds it by herself. In the epilogue, Zuhra defines her identity through linguistic identity, indicating its hybridization that goes beyond national borders:

"In somalo ho trovato il conforto del suo utero, in somalo ho sentito le uniche ninnananne che mi ha cantato, in somalo di certo ho fatto i primi sogni. Ma poi, ogni volta, in ogni discorso, parola, sospiro, fa capolino l'altra madre. Quella che ha allattato Dante, Boccaccio, De André e Alda Merini. L'italiano con cui sono cresciuta a che a tratti

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<sup>11</sup> "Why are you black if your mom is white?"

[...] «And that hair is ugly, you know? ».

"You say?".

"Very ugly, Mar. As ugly as poop."

"You say I'm a poop? »

"You are black. Black like Africans ».

"What are Africans?"

«They are poor. They don't even have shoes on their feet. »

«But I have shoes. And I also have socks ».

"But when your mother found you, you didn't have it ... you were naked. Your mother is white, she has the money, she bought you the shoes. And even the socks she bought you. "

<sup>12</sup> "I don't know Africa. And to say that black blood flows in my veins. And that I was born there. But it's not like knowing it, to its core. It is not quite the same. [...] so I was born in Africa and that's it."



ho anche odiato, perché mi faceva sentire straniera. L'italiano aceto dei mercati rionali, l'italiano dolce degli speaker radiofonici, l'italiano serio delle lectiones magistrales. L'italiano che scrivo (Scego, 2008: 443).<sup>13</sup>

Zuhra wants to define herself in an autonomous way, without constrictions, to become the subject, not the object of the Other's stories (Mihaljević and Carić 2019: 24). Thus, she creates her own hybrid space which reveals the historicity and cultural relativity of the identities (Mellino 2005: 127) that are based on the nation-state structures. In other words, these fixed national identities were adequate in the period of the birth of the national states, but these new hybrid identities indicate a new period of a global world full of mixes and migrations.

## ADUA

In the novel *Adua*, as in *Oltre Babilonia*, the starting point for the stories of the lives of two generations is colonialism. The central character, who describes the environment and the consequences of Italian colonialism, is the father Zoppe, who worked as a translator during the period of fascism. While working in Rome, he is imprisoned and molested for an argument in which he did not partake. The fascists' contempt and racism is evident in the way they speak with imprisoned Zoppe: "Siete zecche, inutili pidocchi dell'umanità. A Regina Coeli è facile morire di fame e di sete, imparalo"<sup>14</sup> (Scego, 2015a: 37). Alongside the direct violence and threats expressed by the fascists, Zoppe mentions the racism with which he meets daily:

E pensare che aveva immaginato belle donne bionde a sua disposizione e tanti amici con cui giocare biliardo. Ma aveva scoperto che un negro a Roma doveva far bene attenzione. «Se possibile» gli aveva detto uno dei capi «dovresti far di tutto per sparire». [...] A volte il disgusto nei suoi confronti si palesava in sputi improvvisi che lui schivava con gran maestria (ibid. 23).<sup>15</sup>

Even Adua, who arrived in Rome, is referred to as the *Faccetta nera*<sup>16</sup>: "per festeggiare a bordo dell'aereo mi cantarono cento volte *Faccetta nera*"<sup>17</sup>(ibid.119). The expression

<sup>13</sup>"In Somali I found the comfort of her uterus, in Somali I heard the only lullabies she sang to me, in Somali I certainly had my first dreams. But then, every time, in every conversation, word, sigh, the other mother peeps. The one that nursed Dante, Boccaccio, De André and Alda Merini. The Italian I grew up with, which at times I also hated, because it made me feel foreign. The sour Italian of the local markets, the sweet Italian of the radio speakers, the serious Italian of the lectiones magistrales. The Italian that I write."

<sup>14</sup> "You are ticks, useless lice of humanity. At Regina Coeli it is easy to die of hunger and thirst, learn it."

<sup>15</sup> "And to think that he had imagined beautiful blonde women at his disposal and many friends to play billiards with. But he had discovered that a Negro in Rome had to pay close attention. "If possible," one of the leaders had told him, "you should do everything to disappear." [...] Sometimes the disgust towards him was revealed in sudden spits that he dodged with great skill."

<sup>16</sup> *little black face*

<sup>17</sup> "to celebrate on board the plane they sang me a hundred times *Faccetta nera* "

*Faccetta nera* refers to a song written in 1935, in the period of fascism. The lyrics of the song absorb all colonial propaganda, describing colonialism as a war of liberation. At first glance, in that context, it was defined as a liberation song with the temptation to unite Italians and Ethiopians, but by analyzing the text it becomes clear that it is only a sexual and carnal union with the African woman (Scego, 2015b, n.p.). *Faccetta nera* is a song that was used to create the stereotype of an African woman ready to satisfy the sexual desires of Italians. Ethiopian women are objectified by colonial discourse, that is, completely desubjected, which can be seen from the words of an Italian count: “Queste piccole etiopi sono come il buon vino delle colline, basta mezzo fiaschetto per stare bene per i dieci anni successivi”<sup>18</sup> (Scego, 2015a: 110). Even the myth of colonialism as the civilizing mission (Luraschi, 2009: 188) is mentioned by the Italian count: “Civilizzare il selvaggio toccherebbe a noi, siamo noi che dobbiamo portare sulle spalle questo pesante fardello”<sup>19</sup> (Scego, 2015a: 86). This conception of Africans as savages and primitives is clear from his opinion on African culture: “Ah, che sciocco, praticherai le danze selvagge dei tuoi luoghi. » C’era nelle sue parole un misto di arroganza e lussuria. «Quelli balli dove siete nudi e agitati. Come bisce, per intendersi»”<sup>20</sup> (ibid. 87). The notion of progress is never value free (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 89), in words of Stuart Hall, “the «West and Rest» discourse could never be «innocent» because it does «not represent an encounter between equals»” (qtd. in ibid.). The expression of the supremacy of the Italians is also seen in the change in the names of the streets by the fascists: “Gli italiani gli avevano appiccato il nome di uno sconosciuto cardinale. Anche a Mogadiscio c’era una via cardinal Massaia, ad Hamarweyne, in pieno mercato per giunta”<sup>21</sup> (Scego, 2015a: 70).

Adua's story refers to the period of the seventies, in which, even if Italian colonialism and the trusteeship are officially finished, there are many traces and influences of the colonial period. The central story is the film *Femina Somala*, a soft porn, which Adua filmed deceived by the Italian director. The name *Femina Somala* refers to the novel of the same name by Gino Mitrano Sani, written in the period of colonialism, which describes the relationship between an Italian soldier and a young indigenous woman, described as a non-heavy body, a beast (Gianzi, 2014/2015: 50). Mentioned example shows the role of the literature's discourse in the creation of the stereotype of the African woman always ready to give her body to the colonizers. This story is an excellent example of the sexualization and objectification of Black women that has its roots in colonialism, as a friend of Adua says: «Ti chiederanno il tuo corpo. Gli italiani

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<sup>18</sup> “These little Ethiopians are like good wine from the hills, half a flask is enough to feel good for the ten following years”

<sup>19</sup> “Civilizing the savage would be up to us, it is we who must carry this heavy burden on our shoulders.”

<sup>20</sup> “Ah, what a fool, you will practice the wild dances of your origin.” In his words there was a mixture of arrogance and lust. «Those dances where you are naked and agitated. As snakes, to be clear.”

<sup>21</sup> “The Italians had pinned it the name of an unknown cardinal. Even in Mogadishu there was a cardinal Massaia road, in Hamarweyne, in the middle of the market.”

con mia nonna hanno fatto così. Non credo che questi siano diversi, sai?»<sup>22</sup> (Scego, 2015a: 122). Scego critiques the Italian cinematographic representation of the Black female body as submissive, humiliated, sexualized and fixed in roles mainly related to physicality (Gianzi, 2014/2015: 5), as it is clear from this quote:

«Arturo, è tua, fanne quello che vuoi» disse Sissi con quella voce dura da generale che mi gelava il sangue.  
E fu allora che Arturo si accorse della cucitura.  
«Questa è tutta chiusa sotto» disse alla moglie.  
«Chiusa?»  
«[...] Bastano un paio di forbici per aprirti. E poi finalmente Arturo ti potrà assaggiare» (Scego, 2015a: 123).<sup>23</sup>

The influence of the opposite representations of Europe and Africa is seen in the Adua's perception of Rome and the Italians, she idealizes the city of Rome as a *American dream* (Mihaljević and Carić, 2017: 308):

Fra tre giorni non sarò più qui. Già mi vedevo a Roma, una città che conoscevo dai libri. Mi ripeteva mentalmente i nomi delle sue vie e delle sue piazze: via Sistina, via Giulia, piazza di Spagna, piazza Navona, via Veneto... Che meraviglia! Già mi vedevo avvolta in un ambito nero Givenchy come Audrey Hepburn, pronta a spiccare il mio personale volo verso il successo. Ero piaciuta agli italiani. Mi avrebbero fatto fare un film. Mi avrebbero resa immortale. Niente più Magalo, niente più miserie (Scego, 2015a: 105)...<sup>24</sup>

After her arrival in Rome and the experience of recording the film, she completely changed in the sense of self-perception: "È quello che sono ormai. Una puttana, una shermutta. Mi ci hanno fatto diventare. In Somalia ero una ragazzina piena di sogni e voglia di vedere il mondo. Loro in pochi mesi mi hanno manipolata, seviziata, usata, trasformata. Mi sembrano passati anni, no mesi. Mi sento tanto vecchia, quasi

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<sup>22</sup> "«They will ask you for your body. The Italians with my grandmother did so. I don't think these are different, you know? »"

<sup>23</sup> "Arturo, she is yours, do what you want," Sissi said in that hard general voice that was freezing my blood. And it was then that Arturo noticed the stitching.

"She is all closed underneath," he said to his wife.

"Closed?"

«[...] A pair of scissors is enough to open you. And then finally Arturo can taste you. "

<sup>24</sup> In three days I won't be here anymore. I already saw myself in Rome, a city I knew from books. I mentally repeated the names of its streets and squares: via Sistina, via Giulia, piazza di Spagna, piazza Navona, via Veneto ... How wonderful! I already saw myself wrapped in a black Givenchy like Audrey Hepburn, ready to take off on my personal flight towards success. I liked the Italians. They would have made a movie with me. They would have made me immortal. No more Magalo, no more miseries...

decrepita”<sup>25</sup> (Scego, 2015a: 137). Her words may stand as a metaphor for Somalia's colonial history which was raped, used and completely transformed by the Italians.

The novel also discusses the problem of the current migrations, through the story of Adua's husband who desires to leave Italy for life in a country that is not as rigid as Italy towards immigrants: “Basta dire che in Italia ti trattano male e ti lasciano in Germania. Ci tengono ai diritti umani i tedeschi, dopo l'Olocausto fanno i buoni”<sup>26</sup> (ibid. 168). Italian negative attitude towards immigrants can be related to the lack of discussion about its colonial past and its responsibility for the chaotic situation in Africa. For example, the fact that in Rome Piazza del Cinquecento is dedicated to soldiers who died in East Africa (Scego, 2015a: 169), in which Adua ironically meets her husband and describes it as “Piazza dei migranti, dei primi arrivi, di tutte le partenze”<sup>27</sup> (ibid.). She sees it as a symbolical Caput Mundi (Mihaljević and Carić, 2017: 313), which indicates its postcolonial redefinition in which different cultures and languages coexist. This appropriation of public space shows the transition from passive presence of the immigrants to the state of visibility, that is Adua redefines the map of the urban space of Rome (ibid. 314).

Adua's identity was greatly influenced by the Eurocentric culture that defines beauty according to the criteria of White people, evaluating the appearance of Black people negatively. For this reason, Adua did several things to get closer to this ideal of beauty, used bleaching creams, depilated and smoothed her hair (Scego, 2015a: 157). From the position of the object, where Adua was placed, she finds her voice by telling her story to Bernini's elephant statue that becomes almost interlocutor or resident of Rome (Mihaljević and Carić, 2017: 299). Through the character of Adua, Scego notes the power of the word or the potential to become a subject again, when she as a subaltern can express herself.

Zoppe's character represents a very confrontational situation in which some Somalis have been. He, as a translator, worked for the fascists who at that time used the Somalis in the war against Ethiopia. His conscience tried to justify it: “Qualcuno avrebbe potuto dire la stessa cosa di lui, chiamarlo persino collaborazionista. Ma lui non stava tradendo nessuno. Non avrebbe levato mai un'arma contro suo vicino, un uomo con lo stesso suo colore di pelle. Lui traduceva e basta. Era un ambasciatore della lingua, un mediatore, non portava pena”<sup>28</sup> (Scego, 2015a: 19). On the other hand,

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<sup>25</sup> It is what I am now. A whore, a shermutta. They made me become. In Somalia I was a young girl full of dreams and desire to see the world. In a few months they have manipulated, tortured, used, transformed me. It seems to me years, not months. I feel so old, almost decrepit.

<sup>26</sup> “It is enough to say that in Italy they treat you badly and they let you in Germany. The Germans care about human rights, after the Holocaust they do the good.”

<sup>27</sup> “Piazza of the migrants, of the first arrivals, of all departures”

<sup>28</sup> “Someone could have said the same thing about him, even called him a collaborationist. But he wasn't cheating on anyone. He would never have raised a weapon against his neighbor, a man with the same skin color. He just translated. He was an ambassador of the language, a mediator, he did not bring pain.”

he felt like the Judah of Christians (ibid. 151), feeling guilty for the massacre of the Ethiopians. His internal conflict is manifested when Adua's name is mentioned: "Dovresti ringraziarmi, ti ho dato il nome della prima vittoria africana contro l'imperialismo. Io, tuo padre, stavo dalla parte giusta. E non devi mai credere il contrario"<sup>29</sup> (ibid. 49). Italian colonialism, which used and forced the Somalis against themselves or neighbors, influenced the identities of the Somalis, complicating their perception of themselves as a Somali, that is, a non-fascist and a non-traitor to the homeland. Like Adua, Zoppe also speaks his story to a baboon and tells his experience of history, that is, the story of a subaltern. From their narratives, Scego shows how the story can be a necessary act to dig deep into one's self and rebuild identity (Gianzi, 2014/2015: 57).

### LA MIA CASA È DOVE SONO

The protagonist of the novel is Scego herself and the plot is the period of first twenty years of her life. Therefore, most of the plot is located in Rome in the seventies and eighties. However, several episodes are intertwined with the Italian colonial past in Somalia. With the story of her grandfather, who worked as a translator for the Italians, Scego describes the beginning of Italian colonialism, before fascism. By then, the Italians had objectified the Africans and used the children as soldiers of the colonial troops: "Nella triste verità dei fatti non erano altro che carne da cannone che gli italiani facevano combattere in prima fila. Ed erano bambini soldati. Venivano reclutati a tredici anni e invecchiavano in schiavitù"<sup>30</sup> (Scego, 2012: 83). The horrors that happened during the period of fascism in Africa are described mainly through the fascist Rodolfo Graziani. Scego notes the episodes of the reconquest of Libya and the Ethiopian war, in which Graziani founded the concentration camps and used the chemical weapons prohibited by the Ginerva convention: "Tra le molte atrocità la più terribile furono i trasferimenti coatti nei lager. Donne, bambini, giovani, anziani venivano presi, brutalizzati, picchiati e veniva abbattuto il loro bestiame. Il tutto poi era corredato da fucilazioni e impiccagioni di massa"<sup>31</sup> (ibid. 85). Since the fascists were the dominant group that had power in their hands, they produced the knowledge (Mellino, 2005: 67) about Somali descent and imposed Italian culture in Somali schools. Scego also mentions the presence of Eurocentrism in Italian and

<sup>29</sup> "You should thank me, I gave you the name of the first African victory against imperialism. I, your father, was on the right side. And you must never believe otherwise."

<sup>30</sup> "At that time the Italians were trying to strengthen their settlements in the ancient land of Punt (as Somalia was called by the ancient Egyptians) and they soon made use of the services of the local population for their purposes. Many were recruited as soldiers. [...] In the sad truth of the facts, they were nothing but cannon fodder that the Italians made fighting in the front row. And they were child soldiers. They were recruited at thirteen and aged in slavery."

<sup>31</sup> "Of the many atrocities, the most terrible was the forced transfers into the camps. Women, children, young people, the elderly were taken, brutalized, beaten and their cattle were killed. The whole thing was accompanied by mass shootings and hangings."

Somali schools in the 1980s as the extension of colonialism, “Eravamo cresciuti in due paesi diversi, loro a Mogadiscio, io in una periferia di Roma, e avevamo studiato il Pascoli. [...] Forse sia io che lui avremmo dovuto studiare altre cose: la nostra storia africana, per esempio.”<sup>32</sup> (Scego, 2012: 28).

The ideology of fascism is demonstrated through the Stadio Olimpico in Rome, which served to celebrate the pomp of the fascist regime and enhance the physical model that the regime wanted to impose on the Italians. Although it was its purpose to be a symbol of fascism, today it is ironically famous for the world record and the marathon won by Abebe Bikila. Scego underlines the importance of this victory for all Africans as a symbol of the absurdity of the ideology of the superiority of Italians towards Africans “L’Olimpico era nato per celebrare lo sfarzo di un regime fascista che tra i suoi piani ebbe la sfrontatezza di umiliare le genti di Africa, e invece celebrò la vittoria di un piccolo grande uomo che non aveva paura di presentarsi al mondo con i suoi piedi nudi. [...] È bello pensare che è stata vinta proprio a Roma, proprio all’Olimpico”<sup>33</sup> (Scego, 2012: 125).

The period of the trusteeship, after the Second World War, Scego (2012: 45) names as a paracolonial domain. That is, the continuation of a relationship of dependence, and indicates the bizarre role of the former colonial master as a teacher of democracy. If we take into account that they were veterans of the Ethiopian war, the irony of the Italians as teachers of democracy becomes stronger. Scego compares this situation with the Nazis and Israel: “Gente che aveva massacrato etiopi nella valle del Faf veniva mandata in quell’antico impero a insegnare la libertà repubblicana. È un po’, passatemi l’esempio, come spedire un kapò a insegnare al nuovo stato di Israele come vivere nel deserto. Qualcosa di completamente assurdo”<sup>34</sup> (ibid. 49).

Scego deepens her critique of Italian colonialism and argues that all the other colonizing countries have faced their colonial history, while in Italy there was nothing but silence, colonial amnesia, in the sense of crimes. This situation leads to the perpetuation of the myth of colonialism as a civilizing mission and, therefore, is very significant, and also dangerous. Scego’s critique is clear from these words:

Gli italiani hanno stuprato, ucciso, sbeffeggiato, inquinato, depredato, umiliato i popoli con cui sono venuti in contatto. Hanno fatto come gli inglesi, i francesi, i belgi, i tedeschi,

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<sup>32</sup> “We had grown up in two different countries, they in Mogadishu, I in a suburb of Rome, and we had studied Pascoli. [...] Maybe both he and I should have studied other things: our African history, for example.”

<sup>33</sup> “The Olimpico was born to celebrate the glitz of a fascist regime that among its plans had the brazenness to humiliate the people of Africa, and instead celebrated the victory of a great little man who was not afraid to present himself to the world with his feet naked. [...] It is nice to think that it was won in Rome, right at the Olimpico.”

<sup>34</sup> “People who had massacred Ethiopians in the Faf valley were sent to that ancient empire to teach republican freedom. It’s similar, if I may use the example, to sending a kapò to teach the new state of Israel how to live in the desert. Something completely absurd.”

gli americani, gli spagnoli, i portoghesi. Ma in molti di questi paesi dopo la fine della Seconda guerra mondiale c'è stata una discussione, ci si è accapigliati, gli scambi di vedute sono stati aspri e impetuosi; ci si è interrogati sull'imperialismo e i suoi crimini; sono stati pubblicati studi; il dibattito ha influenzato la produzione letteraria, saggistica, filmica, musicale. In Italia invece silenzio. Come se nulla fosse stato (ibid. 20).<sup>35</sup>

In the novel the problem of silence on colonial history is addressed as a social problem, that is as a structural problem. Instead of the discussion on colonial crimes, the myth of the Italians as *brava gente* continues to spread: “[...] a scuola mica le impari queste cose. Siamo stati bravi, ti dicono, abbiamo fatto i ponti o le fontane. Il resto lo si ignora, perché non lo si insegna”<sup>36</sup> (Scego 2012: 30). Scego also expresses the desire and the need for a monument dedicated to the victims of colonialism that would remind what was the Italian role in the history of East Africa (ibid. 95). Italy's indifferent and silent attitude is also evident in current migration situations. In this light, Scego describes the story since 2003 when a boat with the Somali migrant group had sunk, after which they only reported about it on the news without any discussion about this problem and the role of Italy in it: “Al telegiornale non importava se quei corpi sarebbero stati seppelliti in grazia di Dio invece di marcire in pieno sole. Il telegiornale, come Ponzio Pilato, se ne lavava le mani”<sup>37</sup> (ibid. 99). Furthermore, Italy doesn't just remain silent, but also continues to define immigration as subject of fear in media, which perpetuates the outdated conceptions of a monocultural Italian identity and the exclusion of migrants, many of whom have lived in Italy for decades (Carroli and Gerrans, 2011: 85-86).

Silence sparked a funeral that symbolized a Somali diaspora protest against the entire colonial past and the difficult situation they find themselves in today. Scego indicates her privilege in comparison with other immigrants because she managed to obtain Italian citizenship, addressing the absurdity and racist character of the citizenship law. “In a *jus sanguinis* jurisdiction, where Italian citizenship is determined by blood ties rather than place of birth (*jus soli*) (Einaudi qtd. ibid. 85)” to be officially recognized as Italian is denied to persons with no Italian blood lines (ibid.). By excluding big part of society from political community, Italy puts on them the community's burdens without giving its benefits (ibid.). As quote address, “Qui se sei figlio di migrante nato in Italia devi dimostrare di essere italiano, hai un anno di tempo per portare la tua

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<sup>35</sup> “The Italians raped, killed, mocked, polluted, plundered, humiliated the peoples with whom they came into contact. They did like the British, the French, the Belgians, the Germans, the Americans, the Spaniards, the Portuguese. But in many of these countries after the end of the Second World War there was a discussion, they fought over each other, the exchanges of views were harsh and impetuous; questions have been raised about imperialism and its crimes; studies have been published; the debate influenced literary, non-fiction, film and music production. In Italy instead silence. As if nothing had happened.”

<sup>36</sup> “[...] you don't learn these things at school. We were good, they tell you, we made bridges or fountains. The rest is ignored, because it is not taught.”

<sup>37</sup> “The news did not care if those bodies would have been buried in God's grace instead of rotting in full sun. The news, like Pontius Pilate, washed their hands.”

documentazione, deve essere tutto in regola, residenze continuative e soggiorno dei genitori compresi. Invece se sei arrivato piccolino qui, a tre mesi, un anno, tre anni, a diciotto sei considerato straniero. Vivi come un estraneo del paese che hai sempre considerato tuo<sup>38</sup> (Scego, 2012: 110).

By narrating her life, Scego offers several examples of racism, but it is very directly expressed in the school environment. The remnants of colonialism are present in the stereotypes that are expressed by the colleges of Scego and their parents. A boy at her school told her one of the stereotypes about Black people: “«Tu hai la pelle nera e questa porta i germi e le malattie. Mamma mi ha detto di non giocare con te, se no mi viene una brutta malattia e muoio»”<sup>39</sup> (ibid. 152). This stereotype has roots in Orientalism because it is the dirty / pure opposition that is linked to the African / European opposition, whose base is a superior look of Europeans on Africans (Mellino 2005: 45). This problem is present in Italian schools, parents express a very racist attitudes, masking them with concern for the success of their children. Scego, in a very direct way, names it as racism:

“Oggi alcune mamme si lamentano della presenza di bambini di origine straniera nelle scuole. Non vogliono far sedere i loro figli nella stessa classe. Ma se qualcuno le chiama razziste, loro negano. «Non è razzismo. È solo che questi bambini limitano la produttività della scuola. Noi vogliamo il meglio per i nostri figli, non vogliamo farli diventare zulu .» Il meglio per loro è inteso come bianco, naturalmente (Scego, 2012: 152).<sup>40</sup>

Very disturbing episode is referred to the situation in which the professor continually asked her: “«Ma come fai a essere così abbronzata, Igiaba? Cosa usi la mattina prima di venire a scuola?»”<sup>41</sup> (ibid. 146). This situation shows that even representatives of a state institution have no regard for racism and indicates how accustomed this racism is to micro situations.

The social situation described above, in which Scego was growing up, has greatly influenced her identity, mainly in childhood and adolescence. As a child, Scego decided to stop talking in Somali because of the school environment where she met with the Eurocentric perception of African languages as something wild: “«Voi non parlate, fate

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<sup>38</sup> “Here if you are a child of a migrant born in Italy you must prove that you are Italian, you have one year to bring your documentation, it must be all in order, continuous residences and the parents’ stay included. On the other hand, if you came here, when you were three months old, a year, three years, eighteen you are considered a foreigner. You live like a stranger of the country you’ve always considered yours.”

<sup>39</sup> “You have black skin and this brings germs and diseases. Mom told me not to play with you, otherwise I get a bad disease and I die.”

<sup>40</sup> “Today some mothers complain about the presence of children of foreign origin in schools. They don’t want their children to sit in the same class. But if anyone calls them racists, they deny them. «It is not racism. It’s just that these kids limit school productivity. We want the best for our children, we don’t want them to become Zulu.» The best for them is understood as white, of course.”

<sup>41</sup> “But how can you be so tanned, Igiaba? What do you use in the morning before coming to school?”



i versi di scimmie. Non si capisce nulla. Siete strani. Siete come i gorilla»<sup>42</sup> (Scego, 2012: 151). Not speaking the Somali represented for her the proof of integration or her way of saying "love me" (ibid. 152). The people who helped her to embrace her Somali origins were the mother and the teacher; the mother with her stories and the teacher with the books and the interest in Somali culture. The mother's stories "enabled her to rise above the daily racist humiliations to which she was subjected as the only child with African origins at an elementary school in Rome (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 88). However, the negative influence of the environment is still evident when Scego describes her adolescence: "A sedici anni la mia differenza mi pesava. La mia pelle, i miei capelli, la mia chiappa decisamente africana erano ostacoli. La mia differenza era un macigno. Avrei pagato per poter essere come gli altri, anonima"<sup>43</sup> (Scego, 2012: 139). She brings out the identity question and expresses the constraints of the identities defined by the society:

"Sono cosa? Sono chi?

Sono nera e italiana.

Ma sono anche somala e nera.

Allora sono afroitaliana? Italoafricana? Seconda generazione? Incerta generazione? Meel kale? Un fastidio? Negra saracena? Sporca negra? (ibid. 33).<sup>44</sup>

Scego wonders if you can be a Black Italian, but, as Camilotti points out, it is apparent right from the title that Scego sees belonging as linked to the spaces in which you grew up and been socialized, not to the color of your skin (Camilotti, 2014: 5). Now as a woman, Scego unites those two identities: "L'Italia era il mio paese. Pieno di difetti, certo, ma il mio paese. L'ho sempre sentito profondamente mio. Come del resto lo è la Somalia, che di difetti abbonda"<sup>45</sup> (Scego, 2012: 19). "Scego represents herself as a subject who inhabits cultural affiliations" (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 83) and she moves between societies in nomadic way – "fluently across and between cultures, without needing to choose one affiliation over another (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 83). Through different places in Rome, story of her family, she creates a map of her city: hybrid version of Rome and Mogadischu (Fiucci, 2019: 5). The crossroad of these two cultures is always present in her mind and it is manifested mostly through her use of languages (ibid. 9). Thus, her hybrid identity is based on her linguistic identity,

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<sup>42</sup> "You don't speak, you produce the verses of monkeys. Nothing is understood. You are strange. You are like gorillas."

<sup>43</sup> "At sixteen my difference weighed on me. My skin, my hair, my decidedly African butt were obstacles. My difference was a boulder. I would have paid to be able to be like the others, anonymous."

<sup>44</sup> "What am I? Who am I?"

I am black and Italian.

But I'm also Somali and black.

So am I African-Italian? Italoafricana? Second generation? Uncertain generation? Meel kale? A bother? Saracen Negra? Dirty Negra?"

<sup>45</sup> "Italy was my country. Full of flaws, of course, but my country. I've always felt deeply mine. As indeed is Somalia, which abounds in defects."

speaking Italian and Somali, she confirms her hybrid identity, as she writes: “Ora posso dire di avere due lingue madri che mi amano in ugual misura. Grazie alla parola ora sono quella che sono”<sup>46</sup> (Scego, 2012: 157). “Scego’s Somali heritage, religion and Italianness are all integral to her subjectivity and are not mutually exclusive qualities of her being” (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 93). At the end of the novel, Scego describes nowadays Rome as a great mix, conditioned by globalization, in which fixed identities, structured according to state borders, become inconveniences, while hybrid and deterritorialized identities become alternatives.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the novels *Oltre Babilonia*, *Adua* and *La mia casa è dove sono*, written by Igiaba Scego, offered a postcolonial analysis of Italian colonialism and of the relationship between Italy and Somalia today. The starting point for the story of each character (the colonized Somalis or the first and second generation of immigrants in Italy) is connected in some way with the Italian colonial history. The life of the colonized is strongly defined by direct Italian violence before and during the period of fascism. With various examples, Scego denaturalises the myth of colonialism, such as the civilizing mission and the expression *italiani brava gente* (Luraschi 2009: 188). Furthermore, several stereotypes are exposed about Black people, whose origins can be traced back to the colonial period. Scego shows that these images are created through various discourses to justify the conquest of Africa and she reveals their ideological nature. In addition, she shows their relevance through the descriptions of the different situations in which Black people encounter racism in nowadays Italy, underlining that colonialism has never ended, but has only changed its form. With these stories, Scego gives voice to subalterns and also to subalterns among subalterns, to Black women, and denaturalizes the discourse of Orientalism, offering the experience of the colonized and discriminated.

The presence of stereotypes that evaluate Black people negatively, while White people as neutral, i.e. normative, influenced the identity of the characters in a way that they refused their identity of origin. However, in the end, the identities of her protagonists, but also Scego’s identity, manage to fight the colonial discourse and become subjects again, by showing another possibility of identifying themselves in a national sense, that erases the boundaries of fixed and absolute national identity. By resisting categorization, Scego’s protagonists “complicate preconceived notions of Europeanness and Islam” (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 92) and they embody “the

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<sup>46</sup> “Now I can say that I have two mother languages that love me equally. Thanks to the word, I am now who I am.”

«different ways in which a subject can have multiple belongings, multiple ways in which ethnicity and citizenship can be combined» (Braidotti qtd. in *ibid.*).

It can be concluded that Igiaba Scego writes to stop the silence that is present in Italy on the subject of colonial history and aims to claim the voice of Somalia through her novels, intended for the new generations born in the diaspora, but also for the Italian public, descendants of the empire (Benini, 2014: 481). In other words, she addresses “Italy’s colonial legacy with the Horn of Africa while simultaneously challenging attitudes towards migrants in Italy who often appear in the mass media as a threat to Italian society” (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011: 83) and also creates “new forms of Italianness, and with them, understandings of identity as complex, dynamic and nomadic.” (*ibid.*).

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