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ELEONORA FEDERICI AND VITA FORTUNATI

## DISPLACEMENT AND TRANSLATION OF MIGRANT CONTEMPORARY WOMEN WRITERS IN ITALY\*

*Abstract:* Taking into account the recent debate on World Literature, Transnational Literatures and theories regarding women's transnational literatures, we will outline how complex and difficult is to define the notion of 'transnational literature' in the intersection of Comparative and Translation Studies. We will start from major issues encompassing: 1) Transnationalism challenges our ideas about literary and cultural works in a national framework, 2) translation has become an hermeneutical category, helpful to understand literary production enriched by migrant writers in the global age and 3) we witness in the literary production of women writers the phenomenon not only of plurilingualism but also of self-translation. In the age of intensified migration in Europe transnational women writers are an enriching and challenging factor in many European literatures for the many issues discussed in their novels: identity, nationality, ethnicity, gender and language. Our essay intends to investigate new women's voices in the Italian literary panorama, voices which make visible how the notion of nationality, literary canon and mother tongue should be re-discussed. Our case-studies are Geneviève Makaping (Cameroon), Christina de Caldas Brito (Brazil), Jarmila Očkayová (Czechoslovakia), Igiaba Scego (Somalia) and Jhumpa Lahiri (Bengali/USA).

*Keywords:* Transnationalism, transnational women writers, plurilingualism, self-translation.

### 1. *A New Concept of Translation in Transnational Studies.*

'Comparative Studies and Translation Studies' are undergoing a phase of methodological rethinking and of discussion on disciplinary borders. It is a moment of great change implicit in a new perspective that wants to take into account a global vision on the state of art of these two research areas. This awareness is born from the idea that the canonical division between literary/cultural studies and translation is not acceptable anymore, because translation is nowadays an hermeneutical category important to understand the complexity of the world. A research area that seems to unite this new notion of comparatism and

\* The essay has been thought and discussed by the two authors. Sections 1, 5 and 6 have been written by E. Federici, whereas sections 2, 3 and 4 by V. Fortunati.

translation is that of 'Transnational literatures/cultures', where the term 'trans' outlines, not only the passage among cultures, literatures and languages, but also the overcoming of barriers and national borders. This new notion about translation permits to investigate complex problems which characterize the contemporary world such as migratory flows, the hybridization among cultures, and a new concept of identity and citizenship. Transnational literary Studies analyse not only migrations of *writers from one European country to another, but also from countries around the world. As a matter of fact, the term 'transnational' recuperates the possibility of exchanges with extra-European countries underlining people's movements and writings about new configurations of geographical and cultural spaces. The transnational perspective therefore, permits to re-analyse the global cultural/literary scene not only from an economic or sociological perspective but also a literary and cultural one. Moreover, the definition 'Transnational Literature', just like 'World Literature', is not a fixed one, but a mobile definition, that is to say a term 'on the move', changing in time. For this reason, defining a female writer as 'transnational' is a complex operation; it implies keeping in mind a series of considerations: firstly, the biographical and existential reasons of each writer, and secondly, the connected economic and political motivations of her displacement and exile. A central issue discussed in transnational literature written by women is in fact, identity, because it is not considered anymore as a monolithic entity but as a fluid identity that overcome painful experiences and that is often written in a different (foreign) language and not in the author's 'mother tongue'. The Turkish-American scholar Azade Seyhan, whose volume *Writing Outside the Nation* is a touchstone text in Transnational literary Studies, affirms that national identity is not funded on mother tongue:*

if language is the single most important determinant of national identity, as many have argued, and narratives (specifically, epics and novels) institute and support national myths and shape national consciousness (e.p., the Finnish epic Kalevala), what happens when the domain of national lan-

guage is occupied by non-natives writers, writers whose native, mother, home, or community language is not the one they write in?<sup>1</sup>

Seyhan highlights that the old terms of literary criticism are not adequate to describe a modified reality; adjectives such as 'exilic', 'ethnic', 'migrant' or 'diasporic' are not sufficient to explain the complexity of linguistic processes, the nuances in writing that come out from geographies, stories and cultural practices by women who choose to write in a different language from their own 'mother tongue'. Azade agrees with what Appadurai states: «No idiom has yet emerged to capture the collective interests of many groups in translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilizations, and post-national identities»<sup>2</sup>. Mother tongue and appropriation of another language, reshaping and remolding of a second language has been the focus of many Postcolonial Studies, writers have written about their use of English and how they possessed it. Various volumes have dealt with writers who chose to write in English while unveiling another linguistic/cultural belonging. The term 'translingual' has been chosen to envision this switching of languages and imagination has been connected to 'translingualism'<sup>3</sup>. Bilingual writers have been considered as translators of an identity in between<sup>4</sup>. The idea that writing in two languages is an act of translation is reiterated by authors who do not just switch codes through lexicon but alternate or reshape syntax and often choose the autobiographical genre. Transnational women writers choose to write in the language of the host country and, for this reason, in many of their novels or essays, they explain the reasons for this choice as being closely con-

<sup>1</sup> A. Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1996, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on their craft*, ed. by S. Kellman, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2003. See also S. Kellmann, *The Translingual Imagination*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> I. de Courtivron, *Lives in translation. Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity*, London, Palgrave, 2003.

nected to a complex identifying process, that is to say, the passage from one language/culture to another involves a distancing process allowing them not only to observe their surrounding reality from an outsider, marginal point of view, but also to operate a sort of self-translation. From this perspective these writers become translators of an identity in-between. What is important to see nowadays is how women writers decide to write in their mother tongue or in the language of the country of migration and see how much this choice changes the notion of nation, identity and the same language they utilize, a language hybridized by foreign sounds and interferences. Authors choosing to write in more than one language, or even utilizing one being aware of the many influences and interferences of the other, define themselves as living in the overlap of two languages. One language overlaps another, partly coincides with the second one; they are enmeshed and intermingled. To live in-between two languages and use them in communicating, means to «switch, shift alternate not just vocabulary and syntax but consciousness and feelings»<sup>5</sup>. This is strictly correlated to what Susan Bassnett has recently stressed talking about self-translation, that is, «translating one's own writing involves more than interlingual transfer»<sup>6</sup>. Emotions and feelings are at stake, and writers express themes such as the loss of the language of childhood, nostalgia, and the adoption of the 'step-mother' as we will see later in the essay.

## *2. Minor Transnationalism and Transnational Encounters.*

The richness of the different linguistic and cultural background of transnational writers makes generalising their specific characteristics very difficult, because they are, to put it mildly, an extremely varied typology. In our research we will discuss mainly writers who have chosen Italy as their abode

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> S. Bassnett, *The Self-Translator as Rewriter*, in *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture*, ed. by A. Cordingley, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 13-26: 19.



and Italian as their language of expression. This phenomenon may be defined with the term used by Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi, that is 'minor transnationalism', since Italian language and literature have been considered 'minor' players on the European stage, compared to English and French language and literature: two nations who also played a greater role in the colonial phenomenon and who conversely were more culturally influenced by it. In the Introduction to the volume *Minor Transnationalism* Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih underline the fact that in order to study what has been defined as 'minor transnationalism' it is necessary to abandon a vertical perspective where a group was hierarchically placed in a higher position and to find a transversal perspective. We should not think about binary oppositions or centre versus periphery but we need to underline the relationships among minor transnationalisms. Today it is important to discuss the relationship among different 'margins', different ethnic communities. The transnational can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without the necessary mediation by the centre<sup>7</sup>. Studying these writers, one realises how little Italian colonialism has been studied, or even totally dismissed, together with its effects on our society: a sort of hidden, repressed and hardly considered phenomenon. Nowadays transnational writers, especially those originating from the Italian ex colonies (Eritrea and Somalia) propose a serious reflection on Italian colonial history and are able to explain the prejudices and the sometime racist and xenophobe attitude towards different ethnicities and cultures<sup>8</sup>. Other examples which underline the complexity of defining a transnational writer arise from Eastern European countries like, for example, Moldavia, Albania or Slovakia

<sup>7</sup> *Introduction*, in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. by F. Lionnet and S. Shih, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> See on this topic *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Postcolonial Europe*, ed. by S. Ponzanesi and D. Merolla, Lanham (MD), Lexington Books, 2005.

from where people migrate towards Italy. The myth of a united Europe no longer corresponds to current reality, since the very definition of Europe is flexible and unstable and the contribution given by these writers and their intellectual richness is due not just to their showing us histories and cultures that we have long ignored despite their geographical closeness, but also to their forcing us to face a critical and ethical reflection of our own social reality. They have highlighted how important it is to imagine and construct a transnational encounter founded on an ethical relationship in the sense envisaged by Emmanuel Levinas. They underline the importance of a dialogue which takes into consideration the history of colonization and imperialism and the political-social spaces where it has taken and still takes place. Only in this way we can think about a transnational politics based on interaction, communication and representation. The importance on ethics, on the behaviour we should assume towards the 'other' from us can make women aware that one of the limits in this dialogue and exchange is to adopt a monistic perspective narrowness in scholarship. Women propose a transversal and transpositional politics where to be ethical means to be able to shift position beyond the binary logic of Western and not Western hegemony. Transnational Studies have mainly been characterized until recently by an economic or sociological perspective, but the scope of our essay is to focus on thorny contemporary issues such as ethnic and religious clashes, social inequalities and cultural changes related to waves of migration in the European context.

### *3. Exiled in Language: Thematic Constellations in Women's Transnational Fiction.*

The writers we want to analyse come from different geographical areas: Geneviève Makaping (Cameroon), Christina de Caldas Brito (Brazil) and Jarmila Očkayová (Slovakia), Igiaba Scego (Somalia) and finally, Jhumpa Lahiri (Indian American). All these writers have deliberately chosen to write in Italian

and they consequently belong to that vast group of writers who have created a new domain within Italian literature. Their texts clearly highlight how migration is not just a social or ethnic concept, but an existential condition. Italian literary criticism, dominated by a conservative tendency, has, for many years, removed or even excluded their works, because they did not comply with predetermined literary canons. Thus, such novels have struggled to be accepted as literary works, because long consigned to only be read as records of a social phenomenon.

The first important consideration to be made is that female writers are an equal proportion to male ones. These writers consciously reclaim their difference in gender and culture, expressing a sexualised and estranged outlook on the reality surrounding them. The representation of female subjectivity emerging from their works – starting from the real experience of a female body, on which the social, sexual and psychological identities of their characters are embedded – represents the overcoming of the traditional mind/body dichotomy that has always dominated Western thought. What's more, Geneviève Makaping, Christina de Caldas Brito and Jarmila Očkayová have, on different occasions and for different reasons, defined themselves as 'eccentric writers' (far from the centre, bizarre odd, unusual, extravagant), and this is symptomatic of a coincidence between their experiences as narrators and the most stimulating theoretical reflections emerging from feminism. We are obviously thinking of the definition of 'eccentric subject' proposed a few years ago by Teresa de Lauretis, who identified, in an ever moving, dis-placed, split, manifold and discontinuous subject, rebellious towards the strict confines assigned to the 'feminine', an alternative creative space for the emergence of new voices and new configurations of female/feminist subjectivity. The gaze of these women writers is the gaze from the margin opening to observe the centre: it is those who have never had a voice, who finally seize the power of words to give us back their vision of the world.

We would start from some thematic constants that may be retrieved from their novels: 1) the impact with Italy generating disappointment, astonishment and nostalgia; this impact

emerges in their novels from the contrast between near/far, us/you. 2) The theme of metaphoric and literal coldness: coldness indeed characterises a foreign and unwelcoming space, in which to feel disoriented, and which drives the search for a bit of human warmth. 3) The theme of nostalgia, of sight, and that of the tongue.

Their feeling of being eccentric writers, of being outside the centre means for these writers, being able to observe and understand the necessary detachment between life and literature and being called upon to operate individual choices that are not dictated by their subscribing to already established models. This is what Jarmila Očkayová has to say on the matter:

In her reflections on geographical uprooting, Simone Weil said that an 'uprooted' person, indeed, has only two possible choices: either living an inertia of the soul almost comparable to death, or throwing himself/herself in an activity that tends to uproot those who are not already uprooted. And that is what I am also trying to do. Uprooted and eccentric: as a woman (happily so), as a woman writer (in any case proud of my female sensitivity, even when my wings hurt and stones are thrown at me, and there is no nest I can alight on), as a foreign writer (for whom Italian is an adoptive language), but above all, by choice<sup>9</sup>.

Why are these writers transnational? Because they experience the paradox of their condition, as Sassen states<sup>10</sup>: on the one hand the global market tends to eliminate nation states in favour of global economic integration, on the other, there still remain immigration policies based on the old-fashioned conception of nations and borders. Choosing Italian language is, as we have stated at the beginning, a conscious choice for these writers and it is in the first place, aimed at getting in touch or relating with the exterior, with the 'other'. These women writers write in Italian because they want us to listen to them. Language in this sense becomes a place where to fight, because as Adrienne Rich reminds us, you have to use the language of the oppressor in order to speak to him. It is thus a political choice,

<sup>9</sup> J. Očkayová, *Al di là della parola*, «Kúma. Creolizzare l'Europa», <http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/sezioni/poetica/Ockajova>, p. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> S. Sassen, *Sociology of Globalization*, New York, W. W. Norton, 2007.

against perfect communication, against the single code translating each and every meaning perfectly.

These writers aim at simply being part of Italian literature, they have no wish of being labelled as 'migrant writers', because according to Makaping this label yet again contributes to their discrimination, rather than to understanding them wholly. A resistance that goes with their aspiration to achieve a future condition of equal dignity with native writers, due to the affirmation of their capacity to consciously act within the Italian literary tradition, even though they are aware of still operating on the outskirts of Italian culture and society. They broach the delicate and controversial theme of linguistic editing, and flattening often imposed by editors to allophone writers. They lay claim to their own dignity as writers and to the vindication of their literary individuality, together with the self-awareness of having much to learn when writing in Italian. A concept shared by these women writers is that of conceiving the Italian language not as a monolithic, but a variegated language. The linguistic solutions adopted by these writers, who possess literary identities moving between two or more cultures and languages, are different, because the indelible cultural legacy of their origin must coexist with their new Italian identity, both of them cannot be given up. Geneviève Makaping has chosen to speak to us in our 'own language', from our 'own home'. She has worked and studied in Italy, she has achieved a teaching position within Italian academia, and has written a biographical and anthropological essay where she uses the method of 'participating observation', but overturning the usual object of her discipline's gaze, which traditionally alights on the 'other'. Her biographical experience becomes a study on us, the white majority, revealing itself to be lazy and indifferent, when it is not violent and intolerant. While denouncing the injustices suffered, the writer reveals our own otherness to us. The authoress thus deconstructs the commonplace image of Italians being 'good fellas', which has contributed so much to the historical negation and removal of the Italian colonial past in North and Oriental Africa, convincing us we were forever immune from intolerance, racism and xenophobia. Her discursive strategy

consists in re-naming everything we ourselves have already branded, labelled and negatively judged: her commitment is aimed at the «deconstruction and re-construction of the meaning of certain concepts»<sup>11</sup>:

Yes, words sometimes are like stones. These words sometimes make me break out in a rash, I was saying, but I strongly resist allowing them to make a dent in my vital organs. What can I do? I deconstruct them. I don't give them another connotation, I limit myself to re-denoting them. (...) For a start... – I want to be the one to say what my name is<sup>12</sup>.

Christina de Caldas Brito, Brazilian, offers, in her stories, an example of a hybrid, variegated language: her heroines speak a language that is a cross between Portuguese and Italian. In *Ana de Jesus*, as in other stories of her collection *Amanda, Olinda, Azzurra e le altre* (1998), the reader is struck by the novelty of the linguistic solutions adopted by the writer: her 'portulian' (a mix of the two languages), whose rhythms and sounds echo the language spoken by Italian immigrants to Brazil. It is a discursive strategy consisting in the invention of a new expressive code, taking its start from the parody of the 'mistakes' typical of foreigners upon first coming into contact with the new language. Although this linguistic game calls for a firm mastery of Italian, the writer tackles it with light hearted enjoyment, producing that skilful blend of expressive lightness and formal balance that characterise her very personal style. *Ana de Jesus* is a sort of monologue by a charwoman to an imaginary 'Lady': the heroine remembers with nostalgia her past and describe with lively humour her current condition. This is almost a linguistic parody, in which Ana's resistance to pronouncing double consonants, and her difficulty in accepting the (Italian) mangling of her name in An-na – «another name that isn't my own» – is a symptom of her nostalgia for the moist and soft sounds of her mother tongue, and of the heroine's difficulty in adapting to the solitude and indifference typical of western lifestyles.

<sup>11</sup> G. Makaping, *Traiettorie di sguardi. E se gli altri foste voi? Trajectories of gazes. If the others were you*, Catanzaro, Rubbettino, 2001, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

The Slovak writer Jarmila Očkayová refuses the mother-tongue ideal, since she considers herself a person moving between languages, whose condition of simultaneously belonging and non-belonging allows her to look at identities which have been fixed once and for all and at mother tongues with healthy scepticism. She resists the temptation to settle in one single conception of sovereign and univocal identity and to face multiplicity without falling into the trap of relativism. Jarmila Očkayová uses a culinary metaphor to describe her linguistic position:

Speaking in one's mother tongue is like finding an already laid table, your food already prepared, brought in from the restaurant kitchen. Adopting a new language, instead, is like having to cook that same dish for oneself. One does the shopping, dirties the kitchen, notices every single ingredient. Then, upon eating, one is more aware of what's on the table<sup>13</sup>.

Jarmila Očkayová, too, states that the editorial and literary universe is hard put to recognise the capacity for conscious action and transformation of Italian language and tradition introduced by these new transitional writers.

Italian is often considered a kind of caste privilege, a special right acquired by birth, and foreign writers who dare to write in Italian are seen with suspicion, treated like plebs aiming to acquire a title. It doesn't matter that elsewhere (in France or in Great Britain) the literary use of the acquired tongue has been considered normal for decades, it doesn't matter how many riches the 'foreigners' bring from their old world, or how deep they penetrate in the new world, and their mastery of the language and its stylistic means are secondary, too: the drawbridge tends to remain firmly anchored to the battlements, it is rarely lowered. To be welcomed in the stronghold of Italian literature, foreign writers lack 'blue blood': Italian drunk in their feeding bottle, ABCs droned in the primary classroom<sup>14</sup>.

In her fiction Očkayová describes the effort made to reach the balance between her two languages, which represents the

<sup>13</sup> J. Očkayová, *L'essenziale è invisibile agli occhi*, Milano, Baldini-Castoldi, 1997, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Ead., *Al di là della parola*, p. 2.

final target of her discursive strategy. The choice of using the language of the present (Italian) does not entail erasing «that set of references, hints, allusions, atmospheres and memories that require an internal decoder linked to the complex cultural background that all languages drag in their wake»<sup>15</sup>, but consists in the capacity of letting this «indelible imprinting» of childhood and adolescence live together with the reality of the present. Both represent precious elements of her cultural identity, while the dialogue between the two protagonist of the novel suggests how polylingualism is an intrinsic characteristic of all languages and all discourses:

«Is it difficult to have two languages cohabit?» I laughed: «You know, sometimes it's difficult to chew and swallow, with two tongues in one's mouth. In order not to dwell on articulating words correctly. In the morning, you look at yourself in the mirror, and make faces, you speak in tongues, actual tongues, the plural: in the sense that next to your tongue you find, within your mouth, a second protrusion, having the same size, shape and sensitivity. Sometimes you even ask yourself if it mightn't be better, to simplify life, having the old tongue amputated (...), but then you get used to it»<sup>16</sup>.

On a meta-narrative level, instead, the author's choice of using Italian and the cooking metaphor she uses can be read as a way of incorporating in herself the otherness represented by our language and literary tradition. Language is a privileged means for introspecting the 'other', especially if the writer adopts a non-mother tongue, foreign to her unconscious and to her upbringing: the foreign text then becomes a form of cannibalism, allowing the authoress to establish a distance between the subject of the enunciation and her linguistic expression.

Thus, the contribution of Italian narrative written by transnational women writers consists in the possibility of revealing the deceptive nature of language; in the potential offered by the cryptic detachment typical of people living in transit between languages and the ability to «break down a few human

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ead.*, *L'essenziale è invisibile agli occhi*, p. 54.



and literary stereotypes»: because with their works they deconstruct the stereotyped and essentialist image of the immigrant or of the 'third world woman'; breaking the limits imposed on the speaking subjects by the institutions. But above all they remind us that «human diversity, with its infinite range of possibilities, is literature's raw material, as well as its reason for being»<sup>17</sup>.

The second point we want to analyse is the theme of nostalgia, closely linked to memory and remembrance. These writers' narratives draw from their autobiographical experiences. Indeed the writers pour into the protagonists of their novels and stories their re-worked life material. The fragments of their memories are not represented as if they were simple documents, but they are re-elaborated so as to give a new version of the old ones, to make us move towards a new way of articulating them. The tension to remember is not just the instrument for a better knowledge of oneself, and of others: it expresses the need to recuperate, recover the past to hand back meaning to the heritage of pain and suffering. In this sense the act of remembering is different from escapist nostalgia (a kind of useless act consisting in wanting something to remain the way it always has been), and it becomes, instead, critical nostalgia, a deeply subversive political act for the chance of illuminating and successfully transforming present reality. In an interview Jarmila Očkayová, being questioned about nostalgia and on the return to one's roots described in the novel *L'essenziale è invisibile agli occhi*, answers that leaving her native country has meant a sort of 'biological tearing, a break that leaves its mark', where nostalgia translates into the absence of what she once used to be. The condition of being a foreigner is here assimilated to that of the child, who, to grow into an adult, must experiment the necessary yet painful detachment from her maternal figure<sup>18</sup>. Očkayová clarifies her position in respect to one of the central themes of migrant literature: the issue of ethnic and cultural roots, shaping the identity and sense of belonging

<sup>17</sup> Ead., *Al di là della parola*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ead., *L'impegno di vivere*, in D. Bregola, *Da qui verso casa*, Roma, Edizioni interculturali, 2002, p. 81.

of every writer, but that, according to her, they have meaning only if we are able to reach out with them to other.

At the origin of the work of Brazilian Christiana de Caldas Brito, a native of Rio de Janeiro, there is the sense of loss, the absence of roots, the heart-breaking angst of being a foreigner – a constant theme in many of her stories – that coincides with a feeling common to all migrants, defined in Brazil by the term *saudade*: from the Latin *solitatas*, *solitatis*. It is a complex state of mind, comprising not just nostalgia, but also the melancholy accompanying solitude and memory: it is thus a fundamental notion to understand not only Christiana de Caldas Brito's poetics, but in general the whole phenomenon of migrant narrative. According to Christiana de Caldas Brito foreigners nowadays facing their *saudade* find themselves in front of two possibilities: on the one hand transforming their experience in enrichment and growth, on the other, remaining totally faithful to their traditions, habits, customs, food and words. But this choice would lead to madness, which according to Christiana is the very condition of those who do not want to adapt, who do not communicate, who close themselves in an idiosyncratic world whose rules are different from those of other people. Writers choosing to follow this path often remain imprisoned in a crystallised and out of time view of her country of origin: the risk – inevitable as it is in the first phase of all migrant literature – is that of remaining forever confined to the theme of migration, reducing one's work to a folkloric and exotic phenomenon. Of this risk, often leading to nostalgic withdrawal and sterile regret for an irrecoverable past, the writer is fully aware, she chooses to not renounce to her *saudade*, considered as a typical feature of her culture of origin, indeed, she uses it as an instrument to retain her identity in her country of reception, although opening to other ways of being. She states with determination that «there is no spiritual progress void of discomfort and obstacles»<sup>19</sup>, and she is capable of transforming her suffering, her pain in a tool for the creation of a 'culture of

<sup>19</sup> C. de Caldas Brito, *Il mio percorso dai racconti ai romanzi*, «Kúma: Creolizzare l'Europa», 5 (2003), <http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/kuma.html>.

social commitment': literature looking upon real life, on people oppressed by injustices and struggling for their dignity. But she does so with an ironic and light tone, which removes weight from the characters' desperation and the sadness of the situations described.

The new contribution by migrant writers of both sexes to Italian literature and society – Christiana de Caldas Brito states – consists precisely in their deep awareness of global contradictions and injustices, because they come from countries that have experienced poverty, wars, dictatorships, unemployment and persecution. Moreover, their capacity of formulating a critical vision of Italian society is observed: these writers are capable of gleaning shades of our reality that often escape Italians themselves, due to the routine and repetition of events that lead us to accept certain habits as inevitable:

Foreigners, instead, are like children, capable of gazing in wonder at things adults are no longer surprised by. (...) To conclude: to Italian literature we are bringing distant themes with new words, a touch of the fantastic, of the emotions linked to our past, and, above all, a different angle in observing Italy. It is precisely in this diversity that the contribution of migrant literature lies. Italians cannot but get to know themselves better when migrant writers pronounce on Italy<sup>20</sup>.

Similarly, in her novel she states:

Those living far from their country take time from turning the obstacle – pain into a pain – growth which culminates in a new enriched identity. This passage, after all, is typical of life *itself* and is true even for those who have never left their hometown: every day we have to leave the homeland of our certainties, of well-known and repeated diagrams, of habits grown useless. Every single day, we must learn a new language. We are permanently migrating<sup>21</sup>.

In these writers, as in so many more, ranging from Julia Kristeva to Gayatri Spivak, to Gloria Anzaldù, the central

<sup>20</sup> Ead., *L'apporto degli scrittori migranti nella letteratura e nella società italiana*, «Gli scrittori della migrazione», I (2003), p. 15 and p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Ead., *Ai lettori*, in Ead., *Amanda Olinda Azzurra e le altre*, Roma, Oedipus, 2004, pp. 117-118.

theme is that of being estranged and displaced as condition and necessity for the contemporary individual: a condition that all of us, both males and females, have to reckon with. And this is why the gaze and the vision become central elements in their novels and stories. For instance, in Jarmila Očkayová's works, *L'essenziale è invisibile agli occhi / The Essential is invisible to eyes* (1997), and *Requiem per tre padri / Requiem for three fathers* (1998) her heroines live hanging in the balance between identity and otherness, between reality and appearance, between truth and illusion. They reflect on the theme of vision as an instrument to delineate the borders of their own identity in relation to others and to the social and cultural context. Her poetics coincide with the necessity of representing the complexity of reality by means of an oblique gaze, – in the balance between thinking and feeling – capable of seeing what is dramatically eluding us in our contemporary life.

The gaze is a central element also in Geneviève Makaping's discourse, which crosses the point of view of those on the margins with that of hegemonic individuals, demonstrating that looking has always been a political act. Finally, writer Christiana de Caldas Brito has insisted on the issue of visibility, which migrant writers aspire to be recognised as active subjects within social reality and within the Italian literary system.

As a last point it is important to stress the perfect intertwining between the content and the form of the novels. Indeed, not only are their characters wanderers, transiting between geographical and cultural spaces, but they also transit across different literary traditions and genres. One of the most interesting features of these writers is the importance they give to the tradition of oral narrative that they juxtapose to the canonical models of western written narrative. Christiana de Caldas Brito states, in her afterword to *Camuamo (o la nonna ritrovata)*, of having been brought up listening to Portuguese folk tales (*Histórias da Carochinha*), to Heinrich Hoffmann and Wilhelm Busch's tales (her mother's ancestors were Prussian who came to Brazil during the Empire), together with Brazilian legends. Geneviève Makaping also claims of having grown within a prevalently oral culture, because she comes

from a part of the world that suffered violent literacy, through the imposition of a colonial language. Hence the difficulty in confronting the linearity required by writing, that does not mirror the experience of real life time, but marks the stages of its temporal and spatial crossings. Finally, Makaping underlines the power, the magic of words: indeed in prevalently oral cultures words do not just signify, but correspond to the action, as illustrated by the episode of the diary where the authoress is disavowed by her family: «“We disavow you” the chorus declared. I was eighteen. I was damned. God, how the memory of that episode of my life is painful. I didn’t cry, but I still carry the wound it inflicted. At home words have value, they mean, they act. The magic of words»<sup>22</sup>.

The interest for fairy tales bonds the Brazilian writer to the Slovak Jarmila Očkayová. The latter has lived the experience of translating Slovak folk tales as an opportunity to introduce to Italians an extremely rich repertoire of allusions, references, metaphors, locutions, synonyms and proverbs. Očkayová herself confirms her interest for the fairy tale dimension when she states she loves fairy tales as a common human foundation, as the archetype of human destinies and great existential themes. This interest is closely connected to the erratic nature of her characters; fairy tale heroes are traditionally travellers, always acting on their own and who are never alone. Translating the ancient Slovak fairy tales collected in the last century by Pavol Dobsinský represented for the writer the chance to introduce Italians to her country’s cultural and historical background. The same way, given the explicit and planned intention of cultural transmission taken on by the authoress, one can talk about a textual transit of themes, characters and motifs taken from an explicit oral tradition, made to migrate towards the area of the novel: towards a consolidated rhetorical symbolic and stylistic system, such as that of written western narrative.

The eccentricity of these writers amounts to a strategic placing, allowing them to transform their exclusion and marginalisation into an instrument for the opening of infinite creative and anti-authoritarian potentialities, in a way to transcend the

<sup>22</sup> Makaping, *Traiettorie di sguardi*, p. 15.

dualistic oppositions and the automatism imposed by cultural and gender belonging. This liberating and anti-authoritarian potential issues form the non-normative and non-exclusive relationship that the writers build with the different literary traditions they cross, and with the manifold belongings they experience. Thus, for instance, Geneviève Makaping transgresses the disciplines of the literary genres and subjects, creating a work that is a medley, a hybrid between literature and anthropology, between an anthropological and an autobiographical novel. Amongst Jarmila Očkayová's novels, *L'essenziale è invisibile agli occhi* is certainly the novel that exhibits the blending of different narrative forms most explicitly. Her writing is set on the border between different literary genres, creating a text that defies the fixity of genres because it can be read at multiple levels<sup>23</sup>. The journey through a heterogeneity of literary texts and genres that Jarmila Očkayová imposes on the shape of the novel, is nothing other than the equivalent of a search for the identity of the writer and the woman in the acquired language.

#### 4. *A Second Generation of Transnational Writer: Igiaba Scego.*

As a second generation transnational woman writer, we have chosen Igiaba Scego, a writer whose Somali family was obliged to leave their homeland due to the civil wars and this awful political situation; a writer who places at the very centre of her narrative the issue of her identity, a multiple identity first and foremost played between Italy and Somalia. Scego's identity is as hybrid as her language is, a language, as Edouard Glissant would say, that is 'creolized'. Through her novels Igiaba Scego reconstructs her parents' family history, as well as the history of Somalia. Her novel *La mia casa è dove sono*<sup>24</sup> («My home is where I am»), is indeed a sort of autobiography where the

<sup>23</sup> A. Gnisci, *Letteratura di migrazione tra Oriente e Occidente*, in *Orienti e Occidente. Confronti e Corrispondenze tra mondi e culture*, ed. by G. Sanna and A. Capone, Roma, Edizioni Fahrenheit 451, 1997, p. 421.

<sup>24</sup> I. Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2010.

writer tells the story of her family. The first chapter, titled *Il disegno ovvero la terra che non c'è* («The drawing, namely, the land that isn't there») opens with the description of a meeting, in London, between Igiaba, her brother, a cousin and her brother's child, and is centred on the issue of the extent to which the exiled belong to the new country that houses them. They decide to draw a map of Mogadishu according to their memories, not just to tell the young boy where they come from, but also for their own sake, to keep the memory of a town that no longer exists, because it has been destroyed by civil wars: «la nostra città era morta dopo la guerra civile; i monumenti distrutti, le strade squarciate, le coscienze sporcate»<sup>25</sup>. And it is exactly by drawing the map of Mogadishu that the writer states that her identity is mixed, its roots are not only in Somalia, but also, and especially, in Rome, in Italy: «Sono un crocevia, mi sa. Un ponte, un'equilibrata, una che è sempre in bilico, ma non lo è mai. Alla fine sono solo la mia storia. Sono i miei piedi»<sup>26</sup>. This mixed identity that makes her feel, like so many migrant writers, within and without Italy, is a great richness, because it allows her to look upon Italian reality from an external point of view from a stranger's point of view, and thus see so many aspects that others cannot perceive, but that also causes her nostalgia for her country of origin: Somalia. There are many parts of her novels where she describes this feeling, provoked by the smell of food, by her memories of her mother's tales. This is what she says about *saudade*: «Non era malinconia, non era tristezza, non era gioia, non era pianto. Era al confine di tutti questi impulsi. Chico Buarque, il poeta e cantante brasiliano, l'avrebbe definita sicuramente *saudade*. Che bella parola! Una parola intraducibile, ma così chiara, come può esserlo solamente il nostro nome in una sera di luna piena»<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21: «our town had died after the civil war; monuments destroyed, the streets ripped apart, consciences mired (-sullied-)». Translations mine.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31: «I'm at a crossroad, I believe. A bridge, a tightrope walker, someone who is always teetering, yet never does. When all's said and done, it's only my history. It's only my feet».

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13: «It wasn't melancholy, it wasn't sadness, it wasn't joy, it wasn't tears. It was at the borders of all these impulses. Chico Buar-

Scego's fiction is particularly interesting because it spotlights how much Italian colonialism has been one of the great removals from our country's historiography, «nascosto sotto un tappeto di omertà»<sup>28</sup> only recently has it started being object of discussion and investigation<sup>29</sup>. She brings a serious reflection on the table of Italian colonial history that might explain the prejudices and the sometimes xenophobe and racist attitudes against different cultures and ethnic groups<sup>30</sup>. Scego thus expresses her stance on this subject: «L'Italia un paese dove il razzismo serpeggia laido dove meno te l'aspetti (...). L'Italia si era dimenticata del suo passato coloniale (...), gli Italiani hanno stuprato, ucciso, sbeffeggiato, inquinato, depredato, umiliato i popoli con cui sono venuti in contatto»<sup>31</sup>. Also in her last novel *Adua*<sup>32</sup> this aspect returns when the writer tells the story of Zoppe, the heroine's father, who under Fascism was beaten to a pulp, jailed, and only manages to have his life spared because he speaks Italian. Zoppe's story allows Adua to tell, in this novel, similarly to *La mia casa è dove sono*, the history of Somalia under Fascist occupation and later on, during the years of the civil wars and Siad Barre's dictatorship. Zoppe is an example of Somali who during Italian colonial rule, since he speaks the language, and plays translator, becomes a collaborator and helps the Fascists. From this point of view Zoppe is different from Igiaba's father, who, in the 1960s, was the Somali foreign minister and during the transition period, speaking Italian, was an interpreter for the British. According to Igiaba it was indeed during this period of transition that all

que, the Brazilian poet and singer, would have certainly called it *saudade*. What a lovely word! An untranslatable word, yet so absolutely clear, as only our name on a moonlit evening can be!».

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*: «Swept under the carpet of a conspiracy of silence».

<sup>29</sup> D. Forgacs, *Margini d'Italia. L'esclusione sociale dall'Unità ad oggi*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> *Migrant Cartographies*, ed. by Ponzanesi and Merolla.

<sup>31</sup> Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono*, p. 16: «Italy, a country where racism slithers, filthily where you'd least expect it (...) Italy had forgotten its colonial past (...). Italians have raped, killed, jeered at, polluted, looted, humiliated the people they came into contact with».

<sup>32</sup> Ead., *Adua*, Firenze, Giunti, 2015.



premises for civil war in Somalia were laid down. She states this: «Sono fermamente convinta che il casino odierno della Somalia ha radici nella cattiva gestione del periodo della transizione»<sup>33</sup>. In the second chapter of her autobiography, *La mia casa è dove sono*, Igiaba recalls that her father was part of the League of Young Somalis, which hoped to create a democracy in Somalia, but in 1969 Siad Barre's military dictatorship rose to power. Her father decided to not collaborate, left Somalia and went into exile to Rome.

In Igiaba's narrative, Bernini's Elephant and Obelisk in *Piazza Santa Maria sopra Minerva* in Rome, becomes the symbol of her existential condition. It reminds her of Somalia, Igiaba, like the elephant, is an exile, she has the same gaze exiles have: «L'esule è una creatura a metà. Le radici sono state strappate, la vita è stata mutilata, la speranza è stata sventrata, il principio è stato separato, l'identità è stata spogliata, sembra non esserci rimasto niente»<sup>34</sup>. And it is for this reason that when she is in Piazza Santa Maria she establishes a dialogue with it, she confides her hopes and fears to it.

Igiaba Scego is a second generation writer and this is felt in many features of her narration. First amongst these is being aware of writing in Italian and inserting Somali and Roman dialect words in it. This is how in *Adua*, the heroine imagines making a scene with a black girl on Bus number 14: «Mi fissava fin dalla Stazione Termini. Ero infastidita dal suo sguardo puntuto. Avrei voluto voltarmi e dirle "basta". Mischiare la lingua madre all'italiano di Dante e fare una di quelle belle scenate che vivacizzano il viaggiare sui mezzi pubblici a Roma»<sup>35</sup>. On the cover of her novel *Oltre Babilonia* (Beyond

<sup>33</sup> Ead., *La mia casa è dove sono*, p. 41: «I am firmly convinced that the Somalia current total mess has its roots in the awful management during the transition period».

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*: «Exiles are halved creatures. Their roots have been torn, their life has been mutilated, hope has been gutted, their origins have been separated, their identities despoiled. Nothing seems to have been left us».

<sup>35</sup> Ead., *Adua*, p. 12: «She'd been staring at me since Stazione Termini: I was annoyed by her pointy look. I'd have like to turn round and say "enough". Mixing my mother tongue with Dante's Italian and making one of those fine scenes that enliven taking public transport in Rome».

Babylon) there is piece pronounced by one of the heroines of the book, Zuhra:

Mamma mi parla nella nostra lingua madre. Spumosa, scostante, ardita. Nella sua bocca il somalo diventa miele. Ma io come la parlo questa nostra lingua madre? Io, Zuhra figlia di Maryam, incespico nel mio alfabeto confuso. Le mie parole puzzano di strade asfaltate, cemento e periferia. Però mi sforzo lo stesso di parlare con lei quella lingua che ci unisce. In somalo ho trovato il conforto del suo utero, in somalo ho sentito le ninnananne che mi ha cantato, in somalo ho fatto i primi sogni. Ma poi, in ogni discorso, parola, sospiro, fa capolino l'altra madre. L'italiano con cui sono cresciuta e che ho anche odiato, perché mi faceva sentire straniera. L'italiano-aceto dei mercati rionali, l'italiano-dolce della radio, l'italiano-serio dell'università. L'italiano che scrivo<sup>36</sup>.

In her last novel, *Adua*, at the end there is also a sort of glossary of Somali terms she used in her narration. Secondly, one perceives that the writer has known Italian feminist movements, because she is sensitive to women's issues. In her autobiography, when she tells the story of the organ in the basilica in Piazza Santa Maria she states: «La sua storia mi ha sempre fatto pensare alla memoria di noi donne. Anch'essa bruciata, silenziata, traviata. E per la mia scrittura che molto deve a quelle voci di coraggio»<sup>37</sup>.

The difference between her mother and her is apparent in the chapter dedicated to the former, a woman the writer has loved very much, a woman with a nomadic past, like her heroine, Adua. Adua before arriving in Rome was a nomad, she

<sup>36</sup> Ead., *Oltre Babilonia*, Roma, Donzelli, 2008: «Mummy talks to me in our native tongue. Frothy, blunt, daring. On her lips Somali becomes honey. But how do I speak this mother tongue of ours? I, Zuhra, daughter of Maryam, stumble over my confused alphabet. My words stink of tarmac roads, concrete and suburbia. Yet I do make an effort, all the same, to speak with her that language that unites us. In Somali I found comfort in her womb, in Somali I heard the lullabies she sang me, in Somali I had my first dreams. But then, in every speech, word, sigh, my other mother peeps out. Italian, with which I grew, and which I also hated, because it made me feel foreign. The Italian of street markets, the suave gentle Italian of the radio, the serious Italian of the universities. The Italian I write».

<sup>37</sup> Ead., *Adua*, p. 54: «Its story has always make me think of the memory of us women. It was also burnt, silenced, misdirected (...). And for my writing, which owes much to those voices of courage».

lived in the bush: «Ero una nomade. Non mi volevo radicare. Ero una nomade. Volevo essere libera di correre nel vento»<sup>38</sup>. She is indebted to her mother for not having been made to suffer infibulation, an often recurring theme of her novels, where this practice is described. Her mother decides her daughter must not suffer the mutilation: «La volontà di mia madre, la sua esperienza di dolore mi hanno permesso di essere una donna completa con tutti gli organi al posto giusto»<sup>39</sup>. Her mother, a woman who is different from Igiaba with a nomadic past, a submissive relationship with her husband, a woman who has never integrated in Roma, and who has maintained strong ties with her homeland. Igiaba instead is a woman who had blended her Somali culture with that of a postmodern Rome, the Rome of 1970s and 1980's cinema and music scene.

Igiaba Scego's narrative is thus emblematic of the characteristics of second generation transnational women writers: their writing highlights how the issue of identity is central because they feel within and without Italy, at the same time. In this sense it has been said that de Certeau's spatial metaphor of the 'rented house'<sup>40</sup> appears appropriate to investigate policies of cohabitation in Europe of migratory flows characterized by multiple linguistic and social and cultural practices. Moreover, Igiaba Scego deconstructs an idea that prevailed for far too long, namely that writing by transnational women writers only possessed value as testimony and lacked precise aesthetic values, because her narrative introduces innovative elements, both from a point of view of narrative structures and of a linguistic one into the canon of national literature.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46: «I was a nomad. I didn't want to take root. I wanted to be free to run in the wind».

<sup>39</sup> Ead., *La mia casa è dove sono*, p. 66: «My mother's will, her experience of pain have allowed me to be a complete women, with all of my organs in their right place».

<sup>40</sup> *Deconstructing Europe. Postcolonial perspectives*, ed. by S. Ponzanesi and B. Blaagaard, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 8.

### 5. *Jhumpa Lahiri: from Hyphenated to Transnational Identity.*

Jhumpa Lahiri born of Bengali parents in London and grown up in the United States is considered a 'hyphenated identity writer', juggling between Bengali and American language and culture. Lahiri won the Pulitzer prize in 2000 for the collection of short-stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies* and she has recently published her last novel in Italian with the title, *In altre parole – In Other Words* (2015)<sup>41</sup>. Lahiri plays with the various definitions that have been given to her:

Take, for instance, the various ways I am described: as an American author, as an Indian-American author, as a British-born author, as an Anglo-Indian author, as an NRI (non resident Indian) author, as an ABCD author (ABCD stands for American born confused 'desi' – desi meaning Indian – and is an acronym coined by Indian nationals to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the US). According to Indian academics, I've written something known as 'diaspora fiction; in the US, it's immigrant fiction. In a way, all this amuses me'<sup>42</sup>.

Can we define this author as transnational? Can she be considered a transnational writer because of her choice to write in Italian, a language acquired late in life because of by her love of and passion for Italian culture and language?

The author offers stories of isolated, alienated migrant characters who long for loss and nostalgia<sup>43</sup>. As she stated in an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, she has translated on the page a feeling of displacement she herself experienced: «I always say that I feel that I've inherited a sense of that loss from my parents because it was so palpable all the time while I was

<sup>41</sup> J. Lahiri, *In altre parole*, Parma, Guanda, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Ead., *Intimate Alienation: Immigrant Fiction and Translation*, in *Translation, Text and Theory*, ed. by R. Bhaya Nair, New Delhi, Sage, 2002, p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> For biographical details on the author see P. Brians, *Modern Asian Literature in English*, Santa Barbara, Greenwood, 2003, chapter 14. For an analysis of Lahiri's short-stories see N. Brada Williams, *Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle*, «Melus», 29 (2004), 3-4, pp. 451-464.

growing up»<sup>44</sup>. This sense of displacement and of non-total belonging to a unique place is reiterated in another interview where the author says, «it's hard to have parents who consider another place 'home' – even after living abroad for thirty years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here»<sup>45</sup>. Affirming that her own knowledge about her mother-country, India, is a 'translation' and not an everyday experience, she also states that her representation of India in the stories is in fact her own 'translation of India'. Metaphors of belonging, memory and translation are thus interwoven not only in her texts but also in her statements. Like other contemporary novelists Lahiri uses metaphors of writing and translation in order to define her own identity and work so that the act of translation is linked to a practice of writing and greatly influences the notion of self-representation; it is a process, as Salman Rushdie affirmed, where something is lost and something is gained<sup>46</sup>. Linguistic and cultural legacies remain and emerge in-between the lines of Lahiri's stories, because as the author states, «tradition is like ink that does not dry». Emblematic in the short story 'Interpreter of Maladies', which gives the title to the entire collection, is the character of Mr Kapasi, a tourist guide and works as an interpreter for a doctor whose patients speak Gujarati. The ability to communicate with people and to transfer meaning from one language to another is for Mr Kapasi a way of putting order in his life and decoding reality through translation: «after months of translating with the aid of a dictionary, he would finally read a passage from a French novel, or an Italian sonnet, and understand the words, one after another, unencumbered by his own efforts. In those moments Mr Kapasi used to believe that all was right

<sup>44</sup> E. Farnsworth, *Pulitzer Prize Winner Fiction*, online at: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/gergen/jan-june00/lahiri4-12.html> (accessed 30 May 2005).

<sup>45</sup> V. Patel, *Maladies of Belonging: an Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri*, «Newsweek International», online at: [http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/patetmll\\_lahiri.h](http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/patetmll_lahiri.h) (accessed 20 May 2005).

<sup>46</sup> S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, London, Penguin, 1991.

with the world, that all struggles were rewarded, that all of life's mistakes made sense in the end»<sup>47</sup>.

While Lahiri's assertion that translation is not only a finite linguistic act but *an ongoing cultural* one reiterates our idea of a bi-cultural approach to translation considered as a cross-cultural transfer, the author's Cartesian assertion: «I translate, therefore I am»<sup>48</sup> is epitomised by her character. The translator decodes reality through translation, and as Harish Trivedi has emphasised, he belongs to a specific typology of characters/translators.<sup>49</sup> The author herself recognises that almost all her characters are translators, insofar they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive. However, in this short story the author evokes the act of translation in terms of «a failed act of speech, a fantasy of fulfilment and desire that ends however in anxiety an defeat».<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, Mr Kapasi receives the confession of Mrs Das's secret, her adultery, because she believes his job as an interpreter will enable him to understand her situation and help her to feel better, on the other, he realises that he cannot neither translate her own malady, which he refers to as a sense of guilt, nor 'translate' Indian history and culture for the Indian-American family. In an interview the author has affirmed that: «the predicament at the heart of the book, the dilemma, [is] the difficulty and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves»<sup>51</sup>. The difficulties of mediating between cultures, the complex task to reveal his own cultural world people coming from a different cultural context is at the centre of the short-story. Even if as Mr Kapasi affirms,

<sup>47</sup> Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> Ead., *Intimate Alienation*, p. 120.

<sup>49</sup> H. Trivedi, *Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation*, online at: <http://www.91stmeridian.org>, (accessed 20 June 2005).

<sup>50</sup> A. Monti, *Acts of Migration and the Despondency of the Lonely Traveller: Reading across Interpreter of Maladies*, in *Jhumpa Lahiri the Master Storyteller. A Critical Response to Interpreter of Maladies*, ed. by S. Bala, New Dehli, Koshla, 2002, p. 86.

<sup>51</sup> Lahiri quoted in O. P. Mathur, *Meaningful Whispers: the Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri*, in *Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller*, ed. by Bala, p. 258.

there is not 'a language barrier' between himself and 'them', there certainly is a cultural one: «'Neat'. Mr Kapasi was not certain exactly what the word suggested, but he had the feeling it was a favourable response»<sup>52</sup>. Her choice of the subject in this short story and her insertion of cultural references to India highlight her own cultural translation, «the continuous struggle (...) to preserve what it means to them [her parents] to be first and forever Indian (...). Unlike my parents I translate not so much to survive in the world around me as to create and illuminate a non-existent one»<sup>53</sup>. Through the *mîse en abîme* of translation and of the figure of the interpreter, the author visualises her sense of belonging to more than one culture and the difficulty on juggling between them.

In her last novel, written directly in Italian, the *es ergo* Lahiri picks from Antonio Tabucchi's work is extremely significant: «I needed a different language: a language which was a place of love and reflection»<sup>54</sup>. This sentence summarises Lahiri's attitude towards the Italian language, a language she has deeply loved from the very start, that she has fiercely wanted to learn and to which she has devoted herself with passion and love for more than twenty years. Her book narrates this love at first sight and the subsequent battles Lahiri has engaged to learn and write in Italian. It is a kind of confession, where the writer reveals her motivations, even the existential ones, urging her to write it in Italian, a language she does not speak perfectly, but that she shapes according to her own rhythms and sounds. Writing in Italian is a real challenge, an ongoing tension for the writer, but this difficulty represents a strong creative stimulus for her. The passage from English into Italian reflects, as she herself admits, a radical transition, a state of total bewilderment that provokes a new force for her writing. Her dominant language is English, which she had to learn in school, and which then became the language of her novels. If the previous writers taken into account here can be considered as marginal, in Lahiri's case the position whence she writes is

<sup>52</sup> Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*, p. 59.

<sup>53</sup> Ead., *Intimate Alienation*, p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Ead., *In altre parole*.

defined as marginal by the author herself «scrivo ai margini, così vivo da sempre ai margini dei Paesi, delle culture. Una zona periferica in cui non è possibile che io mi senta radicata, ma dove ormai mi trovo a mio agio. L'unica zona a cui credo, in qualche modo di appartenere»<sup>55</sup>. And later on: «Fin da ragazza appartengo soltanto alla parole. Non ho un Paese, una cultura precisa. Se non scrivessi, se non lavorassi alle parole, non mi sentirei presente sulla terra»<sup>56</sup>. The writer feels as if she were 'suspended' between several worlds, and cultures, with an imprecise identity and to describe her situation she resorts to the image of two-faced Janus:

Mi viene in mente Giano bifronte. Due volti che guardano allo stesso tempo il passato e il futuro. L'antico dio della soglia, degli inizi e delle fini. Rappresenta i momenti di transizione. Veglia sui cancelli, sulle porte. Un dio solo romano, che protegge la città. Un'immagine singolare che sto per incontrare dovunque<sup>57</sup>.

Jhumpa Lahiri interweaves her declarations of love to Italian language and culture with her own life: she juxtaposes her mother, a mother with whom she had a complex relationship, a mother characterised by a monolithic identity, who wouldn't change, obsessively faithful to the culture of her homeland, with her own constant striving to transform and change. This is the reason Lahiri has always deeply loved Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which she read when still at University. The passage describing Daphne's flight from Apollo and her metamorphosis in a laurel tree becomes emblematic to explain what writing

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75: «I write on the margins, and thus I have always been living on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral area where it is not possible for me to feel rooted, but where by now I feel at ease. The only area I believe in a certain way, I belong to». Translations mine.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76: «Since I was a girl I have only belonged to words. I don't possess a definite Country, a definite culture. If I didn't write, if I didn't hammer away at words, I wouldn't feel present on earth».

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86: «Two faced Janus springs to my mind. Two faces looking at past and future at the same time. The ancient God of the threshold, of beginnings and ends. He represents the moments of transition. He watches over gates, over doors. An exclusively Roman god, protecting the city. A singular image I'm about to meet everywhere».



in Italian has meant for her: «i momenti di transizione, in cui qualcosa si tramuta, costituiscono la spina dorsale di tutti noi»<sup>58</sup>.

The final exemplification of Lahiri's act of translation and self-translation is the last publication in Italian, *Il vestito dei libri* (2017), just published by Guanda. In the *Afterword* the author explains the birth of this work and the many passages from one genre to another and from one language to a second one. The book is a development of a *lectio* written in Italian for the XIX edition of the writers' festival, *Festival degli scrittori*, which has taken place in Florence in 2015. The paper has been edited by one Italian Professor in American Studies and one editor. The Italian text has been translated into English, not by the author herself, but by her husband, Alberto Vourvoulias Bush, and published in a bilingual edition by the Fondazione Santa Maddalena. Then both texts have been revised by the author in order to prepare the American edition for Knopf. After that, in order to prepare the Italian edition, Lahiri has worked on the revised English text, added something and as she affirms, «translated herself from the English into Italian» in a backward and forward between the two languages. Octavio Paz's assertion that «each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation of another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation»<sup>59</sup> is further problematized by the act of self-translation. If translation is the principal means we have of understanding the world we live in, because the world, Paz says, is presented to us as a growing heap of texts, translations of translations, with Lahiri's texts this idea of re-translation and change goes further. The act of writing and translation are strictly interwoven and utilising the paratextual element, Lahiri explains to the reader the birth, the development and the final creation of the text, a text born in two lan-

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125: «those moments of transition, when something transmutes, constitute the [true] backbone of us all».

<sup>59</sup> O. Paz, *Translations of Literature and Letters*, in *Theories of Translation from Dryden to Derrida*, ed. by R. Schulte and J. Biguenet, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 154.

guages at the same time. Lahiri positions herself very clearly in the *Afterword* as a writer/translator in between two languages/cultures, and not as an author born and bred in both languages. Italian as we have seen, is the result of a passion, of an intellectual love, and English is only a half of her linguistic and cultural background. The mother-tongue, the language of her mother, Bengali, is not present.

In this act of self-translation Lahiri reverses the aphorism translator/traitor and takes in her own hands the possibility of text 'manipulation' and change. Lahiri is a perfect example of the contemporary condition of global mobility and cultural exchange of the last decades which has produced a growing corpus of narratives of migration. The 'host' language, in this case an 'adopted' language is appropriated, mastered and manipulated, in an act of self-translation from and to one language to the other. In this light, the bilingual text stands as a symbol of the writer's translation by someone else, while the two texts in the two different languages result from her own self-translation and proposes a space for a new linguistic creativity.

## 6. *Conclusion.*

In conclusion, we could hypothesize that writing in a foreign language means to reconstruct one's identity through the 'transmigration' from one language/culture to another. From this perspective, cultural transnationalism does not mean to erase one's roots of belonging but it is rather based on the ideas that through the passage in more cultures one's identity can be strengthened and acquire a critical perspective for building up a new future. We would like to underline how reductive it is to segregate, as the Italian literary establishment has done, especially at the beginning, these writers in the conceptual niche of migrant writers. This is something similar to what happened to the various definitions of Lahiri she herself reports. Writers choosing to write in Italian both for the complexity of the narrative techniques used and for the linguistic solutions adopted certainly enrich the wider panorama of con-

temporary Italian literature. It is important that both in their novels and in their critical writings, these writers elucidate the choice of utilising Italian and not the mother tongue, and this choice is closely connected to a complex identifying process: the passage from one language/culture to another involves a distancing process allowing them not only to observe their surrounding reality from an outsider, marginal point of view, but also to operate a sort of self-translation. The writers become translators of an in-between identity, emblems of a country where different languages can be heard and where other cultures can be seen. They can be defined as transnational writers because they transcend national borders, questioning the continuous struggle to preserve the mother tongue (and mother culture) and the adaptation to the new land, its language and its culture. Borrowing and adapting the words by Lahiri, we can say that all these writers translate themselves, not so much to survive in the world around them but to illuminate a new one.