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Embodying Colonial Ghosts in Postcolonial Italian Women's Writing

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Abstract

While Italian colonialism in Africa is an aspect of Italy's history that has started to receive academic attention in the last three decades, it remains outside the collective memory of many Italians. In opposition to this lack of mainstream cultural awareness, a proliferation of literary works has been produced, predominantly by female writers with origins in Italy's former colonies in East Africa, filling in the historical omissions and, importantly, providing a transnational voice to gendered experiences of colonial trauma. Many of these authors emphasise the female corporeal experience of colonialism and its legacy. My PhD thesis explores the representation of gendered colonial trauma and its intergenerational transmission through the female body. I examine a range of literary texts by women writers with origins in Somalia and Ethiopia, dating from 2007 to the present. Their work ranges across contexts and languages (Italian and English), yet each narrates colonial history in a highly embodied way, providing an alternative discourse to the nostalgic view of the past offered by mainstream Italian literature since the post-war period.

Keywords: the body, intergenerational trauma, Italian postcolonial literature, transnational women's writing, trauma theory, Ubuntu.

Historical Context: Italian Colonialism and its Aftermath

While Italian colonialism is often associated with Mussolini's Fascist rule, it began decades before the Fascist period (1922-1943), soon after Italy's unification (1861-1870), in a bid to help securing the newly created country's fragile sense of national identity. The first colony, Eritrea, was occupied in 1890, and from 1890 to 1941 Italy claimed parts of Somalia and Libya, Ethiopia, the Dodecanese Islands, and Albania. However, Italy's defeat in World War Two meant the loss of all its colonies by 1943. In the post-war years in Italy, there was no public debate on Italian colonialism even though there had been multiple incidents of war crimes, such

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as the use of chemical weapons during the Ethiopian invasion (1935-1941) and the reprisals on civilians in Addis Ababa after an attempt on Italian General Rodolfo Graziani's life, which led to the assassination of twenty percent of the city's population.[4] Italy applied strategies for avoiding culpability in the immediate post-war years, as historian Filippo Focardi has analysed. He elucidates two narratives which emerged at the time to mitigate Italian responsibility. First, the image of the "bad German soldier" was contrasted with the "good Italian", who was "catapulted against his will into a disastrous war".[9] Second, a clear distinction was made between Italian crimes and Fascist crimes (337). This created the belief that war crime trials were not necessary in Italy, as the country had already liberated itself from Fascism (334). This lack of an "Italian Nuremberg" allowed for the myth of "italiani brava gente" ("Italians – the good colonisers") to endure and play a key role in how Italy remembers its past.

Legacies of Colonialism in Contemporary Italy

Italy, like Ireland, is a country with a long history of emigration, and has only become a significant destination country for immigrants since the 1980s. The heightened visibility of immigration has led to an increase in racist attacks, along with a tightening on citizenship laws. The silence over the colonial period has meant that the issue of racialisation has never been analysed. This results in the persistence of racist attitudes which emerge in political discourse, such as that of the popular anti-immigrant Lega party. In addition, media representations containing colonial tropes, such as the hypersexualised Black female body, often reappear.

Italian Postcolonial Literature

It is in this context that Italian postcolonial literature has emerged in the last three decades. The authors I explore in my thesis come from a range of backgrounds and include migrants to Italy (Somali Shirin Ramzanali Fazel), second generation Italians (Somali Italians Igiaba Scego and Cristina Ali Farah; Ethiopian Italian Gabriella Ghermandi), and an Ethiopian American.[16] All can be considered "postcolonial" in the sense that they have origins in Italy's former colonies of Somalia and Ethiopia, and their texts explore Italy's often-forgotten colonial past. These women writers foreground the gendered experience of colonialism in their work, rewriting the colonial period from the female colonized perspective. I have chosen to analyse a selection of their novels which narrate the past through its effects on the female protagonists' bodies. South African feminist Desiree Lewis writes, "[t]he African female body has been central to colonial narratives, fantasies and desire during the nineteenth century and before".[15] Indeed, for example, in Maaza Mengiste's 2019 novel The Shadow King, Italian General Carlo Fucelli (based on Rodolfo Graziani) tells Ettore, an official war photographer charged with taking pictures of captured Ethiopian female fighters, "[y]ou're not photographing women, you're creating Achilles".[16] This exemplifies how the Fascist propaganda machine was fueled by images of seemingly subservient native women. These colonial attitudes towards women persisted through the postwar decades and are documented in the novels, which recount the exploitation

Figure 1: From left to right: Somali writer Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Somali Italian writer Igiaba Scego,, Somali Italian writer Cristina Ali Farah,, Ethiopian Italian writer Gabriella Ghermandi,, Ethiopian American writer Maaza Mengiste.

of the Black female body in the Italian soft porn industry of the 1970s[19,20] and the contemporary abuse of Black female migrant workers in the role of carers for the elderly.[11] Other recurring themes in the narratives are female genital mutilation, life for women under military dictatorships, civil war, migration, and contemporary racism in Italy. The novels thus highlight the intersectional nature of oppression suffered by Black women.

The Black Female Body: a Site of Violent Inscription and Resistance

South African feminist scholar Pumla Gqola notes: "Relationships to embodiment for African and African-descended and located people have been inextricably linked to enslavement, hypervisibility, and other institutionalised epistemic projects for over five centuries. All these bruisings have racialised, gendered, and sexualised dimensions",[12] which I unpack in my PhD thesis. However, the racialised female body is not presented merely as a site of inscription for colonial and patriarchal violence, but also as a site of agency. The practice of storytelling is foregrounded in many of the texts as a curative practice, not only within families and communities, but as a gesture of transnational community building. Ghermandi concludes her novel, Regina, which comprises oral histories from Ethiopians and Italians who lived through the colonial occupation, by enfolding the Italian reader into the shared histories of the two countries: "And so, that is why I am telling you his [her Ethiopian elder's] story. Which is also my story. But now, yours as well".[11] Furthermore, the novels draw attention to the intergenerational nature of trauma for the female protagonists. This generational transmission of trauma occurs on three levels: within families; on a societal level; and transnationally. The three chapters of my thesis focus on each of these spheres.

Making Colonial Ghosts Visible through Applying Trauma Theory

In my analysis of the representation of intergenerational trauma in the novels, I draw on trauma theory. To reflect the multiple cultural heritages of the writers I explore, I employ the lens of both Western trauma theory and African research on trauma and reconciliation.

From Classic Trauma Theory to a Transnational Approach

My research explores intergenerational trauma through the lens of cultural trauma theory, which emerged within literary criticism in the 1990s and was heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theories. Many early trauma theorists were interested in investigating the effects of the Holocaust on survivors and subsequent generations. Cathy Caruth, a pioneer in the field, defined trauma as the "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena".[5] While Caruth's contribution to the establishment of the discipline of trauma theory is widely acknowledged, later trauma theorists have criticised her Eurocentric approach, pointing out that a theory based on Western psychoanalysis cannot be applied to non-Western contexts, such as postcolonial African societies, as it does not consider the specificity of those cultures. For example, Stef Craps, a postcolonial trauma theorist, takes issue with Caruth's paradigm as it focuses on the trauma of the individual as caused by one extraordinary event, and therefore does not adequately account for systemic trauma, such as racism.[6] Michael Rothberg, a theorist who, like Craps, has focused on decolonising Western trauma theory, takes a transnational and transtemporal approach to trauma which he describes as "multidirectional memory". This term refers to how collective memory develops "unevenly – and sometimes unexpectedly" in that it can sometimes come to public consciousness through unlikely triggers,[18] such as the reporting of a contemporary atrocity. The concept of multidirectional memory is extremely pertinent to the texts I examine, many of which draw together seemingly disparate collective traumas. Igiaba Scego who, in her 2020 novel La linea del colore,[21] juxtaposes American slavery and abolition, Italian unification, and the contemporary horrors faced by Somali migrants attempting the journey to Italy, has said that she often takes a comparative approach to different historical traumas as the experiences of others can teach us a lot about our own.[3]

The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

When it comes to how trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next, literary theorist Marianne Hirsch coined the term "postmemory", which explains how the children of trauma survivors experience the memory of their parents' trauma in their imagination and their bodies. She notes that children seem to recall their parents' traumatic experiences through the stories, photographs and behaviours that surrounded them growing up.[13] Gabriele Schwab elaborates on Hirsch's notion of postmemory and is particularly interested in how these memories seem to be transmitted through the parents' body language. She draws on psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's notion of the "crypt" and the "phantom". Schwab describes the crypt as something we bury inside ourselves and cannot mourn. The phantom, on the other hand, is the "haunting" of a child by the unexpressed loss of the parent. It is always unspoken by the parent and passed on to the child as a "gap".[1] Since the crypt and the phantom are not linguistically expressed, Schwab notes:

> *[o]ften it is the body that becomes the site of narration. . . In telling this story, the body can speak as a cannibal from inside, devouring food or ejecting it violently. [. . .] The body can abandon itself and speak the trauma of disrupted care; it can hurt itself to speak the pain; it can waste away to speak the wish to die.* (45-6)[23]

In the texts I examine, the female protagonists' incorporation of their parents' (and grandparents') colonial trauma is apparent. This unverbalized "phantom" is expressed in a myriad of embodied ways, including bulimia, self-harm, depression, and an inability to form substantial relationships.

Ubuntu: An African Approach to Trauma and Reconciliation

Jessica Horn, a feminist activist and scholar with Ugandan roots, is critical of applying Western trauma models to an African context as the Western individualistic notion of the self differs from the African one. In Africa, the collective self is as important as the individual self. Wellbeing is highly contingent on how one's distress is held – or not held - by others in the community.[14] An approach to trauma treatment that does not consider mutual interdependence, encapsulated in the notion of Ubuntu, cannot succeed (91). The philosophy of Ubuntu can be loosely translated as "a person is a person through other persons".[17] Many of the texts I analyse incorporate this notion of Ubuntu through their multivocal narrative structure. This choral narrative form embodies a sense of interdependence and provides a corrective to monolithic Italian historical narratives. It requires the Italian reader to bear witness to the crimes of the colonial past and recognize their shared history with many immigrants and second-generation Italians.

Conclusion

While my thesis focuses on the literary representation of the traumatic legacy of Italian colonialism, it does not wish to portray the female protagonists as mere victims, as each of the texts' foregrounds their strategies of survival and resistance. Horn notes that a focus on traumatic resilience can be a decolonial strategy.[14] The philosophy of Ubuntu, by placing equal importance on the construction of individual subjectivities and community building provides a system of resilience to trauma survivors. The literary texts I analyse portray this dual aspect of Ubuntu in the importance they place on storytelling in the construction of individual subjectivity, and in their interpellation of the Western reader as witness to the traumas endured, thereby creating a transnational community. This creates a dialogue with the other which allows for "creative subjectivity",[8] a subjectivity that develops through empathy and understanding across cultures. Through their narration of the buried aspects of Italian colonialism, these authors make the colonial ghosts visible, helping this difficult past to finally pass.

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Declarations of interests

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