

PREJUDICE, DIFFERENCE AND THE ROLE OF LITERATURE: KOSSI KOMLA-EBRI'S *IMBARAZZISMI* AS DECOLONIAL MODEL

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Sommario

Questo articolo analizza le due raccolte di racconti, Imbarazzismi e Nuovi Imbarazzismi, dello scrittore italo-togolese Kossi Komla-Ebri, con riferimento al dibattito decoloniale. L'immigrazione in Italia da parte dei cittadini di quelle che erano colonie introduce una molteplicità di nuove 'realità'. Raccontate dal punto di vista del migrante nero nei centri urbani italiani, queste 'narrazioni flash' espongono atteggiamenti razzisti latenti da parte degli italiani. I libri di Komla-Ebri sfidano l'eurocentrismo dell'establishment mostrando principalmente il punto di vista degli oppressi. In questo senso si può dire che i libri siano parte integrante del dibattito intorno a questioni di decolonialismo.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Kossi Komla-Ebri, Postcolonial Italian Literature, Short Story

This article focuses on two Italian short story collections by the Italian Togolese writer Kossi Komla-Ebri. The author, a medical doctor whose recreational writing has turned him into a well-known authorial figure in Italian literary circles, is involved with issues of immigration, particularly relating to the experience of people from African countries. These 'flash narratives' stem from his personal experiences, first as a student, newly arrived in Italy from Togo in 1974, and his subsequent encounters with the racial bias of his Italian hosts, during the course of the next thirty years of Italian sojourn.

His two best known books, originally published as *Imbarazzismi* (2002) and *Nuovi Imbarazzismi* (2004) are a springboard for

discussion around the issue of racism and its many connected themes as well as generalised reflections on the social 'clashes' between ideological standpoints *vis-à-vis* disparate cultures and their host environment. Short and engaging, these stories have layers of multifaceted relevance: simplicity of language, a marked standardisation in their modern European urban settings, humour and an engaging immediacy which contribute to their versatility in the debate around decoloniality in Western settings. As texts they lend themselves to varied applications and should be seen as *spunti* for the revisiting of central themes associated with interpersonal and social scenarios. These issues, of course, are multi-varied and diverse: racial identities are ever more at the centre of modern Italian society. Seen in the light of the current worldwide political debate on the ever-growing necessity for decoloniality in universities and society at large, the polemic against racism in movements such as Black Lives Matter and other varied regional examples, these stories can claim more immediate relevance in a wider social network and could be utilised effectively in the classroom, in the sensitisation process of young people against racism.

Extending beyond the clash of cultures that engaged many of the earlier examples of migrant literature in Italy, these stories record the minutiae of day-to-day experiences of long established African citizens living and working in Italian cities of the North, thereby grappling with "the concept of diversity in the future of Europe" (Kokodoko, 2011:1). The themes running through the stories cover most of the ground on which the decoloniality debate focuses. They closely observe the diverse perspectives that are the result of the Italian colonial experience and describe the many facets of cultural diversity that still today arise out of historical misreadings and misunderstandings. They therefore address the decoloniality debate at a more fundamental level than other purely theoretical approaches, identifying personal struggles that speak directly to the reader's emotional understanding.

It is the contention of this article that the necessity for sensitisation of the general public would be best served by having children read these stories in classrooms as experiences of cultural interaction rather than purely literary texts. According to Komla-Ebri himself

“[m]any immigrants think our emancipation is only economic and political, but we are convinced it's cultural and that we can have a more profound influence through culture” (Scherer, 2013:1).

The main point of discussion is, of course, racism, which can be broadly defined as “a dense system of ideological practices over time entwined with history, language, gender and problems of representation and interpretation” (Collits, 1994:64) constituting the starting point for the collection's broad-based social investigation. If, with Collits, we take the broad categories of “history”, “gender”, “language”, “representation” and “interpretation” as areas of intersection in any definition of racism, we can see these terms representing a multiplicity of nodes of engagement with contemporary Italian society, making these stories far more complex and far-reaching than appears from their apparent simplicity. If, however, we start from Foucault's identification of racism as a by-product of the “technology of power” (Mezzadra, 2012:39), which echoes Fanon's idea of its “mutual support with economic and political or military practices, [making racism] the most visible element of the whole” (Julien, 2000:156), then the stories assume an even greater relevance in a modern urban interrogation, laying bare the dynamics that still dominate engagement in the currently extant hierarchies of power in Western societies.

Told mainly from the perspective of black migrants of the Italo-Togolese community, the characters are, however, also Somalian, Eritrean and Ethiopian, amongst the many cultures that today create the contemporary Italo-African diaspora. Through the eyes of the author, the reader witnesses brief interactions, both good and bad, first-hand, between people of different races in everyday settings, starkly identifying a spread of attitudes that mask deeply entrenched notions of the ‘Other’. The importance of these stories, therefore, is not simply the retelling of autobiographical detail or the engagement with amusing social vignettes, but the fact that, within the broad parameters of the decoloniality debate, they take cognisance of important theoretical nuclei that are at the root of the discussion.

Immigration into Italy by the citizens of what were former Italian colonies – the so-called new “country areas” (Julien, 2000:150) – has brought current Italian society face-to-face with a multiplicity of

realities, amongst which the need for a revision of the “concept of *italianità*” (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012:3). These ‘realities’ can be defined as a “family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as the fundamental problem [of] the modern age” (Nelson Maldonado Torres, quoted in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013:15). However, it is one thing to identify the strands of coloniality and the layers of “colonization of the imagination” (Quijano, 2007:160) in western societies, another to introduce a regime of change that can become integrated into a new, common process of knowledge creation that is both truly equitable and fully inclusive. The scenarios that appear in the stories all revolve around the basic theme of prejudice towards anyone who is perceived as the ‘Other’ by being ‘different’ in outward appearance, or what the author calls “differently visible” (Kokodoko, 2011). Komla-Ebri’s book adds to this already raging intellectual debate on a creative or, as it were, more ‘applied’ level as a systematic taking of cognisance what amounts to a face-to-face confrontation between Italy and Africa in its multiple day-by-day social interactions. As such, this intellectual debate becomes more easily consumed, understood and emotionally absorbed by those levels of Italian society most distanced from any possible sympathy for the issues at stake. Working as he does in the Northern regions of Italy, associated most closely with the country’s openly expressed anti-immigrant sensibilities, Komla-Ebri’s stories are almost akin to the notion of journalism from the war front.

Written with dry humour¹ and an honesty of approach that looks unflinchingly at all aspects of the immigrant condition, from both sides of the racial divide, the book is accessible reading while also hard hitting in content. Vignettes of immediately recognisable social situations, enlarged to embrace the general plight of migrants attempting to find new lives in the ‘old’ centres from which their historical colonial experience had originated, the stories are at once personal and emblematic and would be valuable teaching tools with which to create resonance where it counts most; in the school environment. The South American idea of *buen vivir* could be a case in point as illustrative of the “pedagogical model [...] [that] derives

¹ Humour is a very important aspect of the author’s approach and would justify a full study of its own, unfortunately outside of the scope of the present work.

from a concept of reciprocity that precedes capitalist formations” (Jaramillo & Carreon, 2014:399). Although not based on the political ends envisaged by the *buen vivir*, *Imbarazzism*'s confrontational, educational and profoundly transformative aims have a lot in common with this movement's notion of reciprocity in a society based on common ideas and mutual respect:

The need to establish acceptance and respect for others thus depends upon a basic measure of equality where the other is recognized for having a voice worthy of being heard. (Jaramillo & Carreon, 2014:400)

Komla-Ebri's books make the immigrant voice in current Italian society “worthy of being heard” as well as easily spread.

If we tease out the central themes using the writings of principal theorists involved in the movement, we can correlate the stories' content with the broader decoloniality debate. In a teaching environment, this could be a useful tool for a dramatisation of the consequences the entrenched notions of the West and its supremacy can have on the daily existence of people living in antagonistic environments. In the tradition of the American writer Richard Wright, who described himself as Western while also “inevitably critical of the West” (Julien, 2000:162), Komla-Ebri provides the double vision of the insider/outsider, a salutary perspective of ‘distance’ still part of his vision in spite of his long standing ‘westernisation’. His analysis of the immigrant's relationship with the racially prejudiced society of modern Italy is therefore a carefully honed personal perspective which provides the reader with his deeply considered viewpoint. The value of each story is global and its interest universal but the point from which these truths spring is the small day-to-day interaction that happens between individuals at the bus stop, in church or at the supermarket.

In the way in which he presents ‘cultures’ as parallel, Komla-Ebri's writing is able to enlighten the native Italian reader – the intended recipient of the book – on the value of diverse identity to be found in personal culture and its varied manifestations in everyday life. In the words of the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony

Appiah, “social identities connect the small scale where we live our lives alongside our kith and kin with larger movements, causes and concerns” (Appiah, 2016). This is exactly what Komla-Ebri has achieved in writing these stories. Each story covers certain prejudices identifiable with a number of concepts dealt with by decolonial writers, often in a manner that makes the idea lighter and more accessible to a casual reading public. For this reason, the use of these stories in the classroom could lead to theoretical teachings in the guise of entertainment.

In a brief overview of the main areas of contestation relating to decoloniality, we find a number of relevant themes which are also at the core of the encounters portrayed in these stories and identifiable as talking points for the clashes to which the collection addresses its attention. As a starting point the reader encounters the core issue, perhaps most important of all others, in the recognition of the insularity that is at the root of European self-identification. In the story “Culture ... altre” about the author’s German friend Michael, the insularity of European identity is pitted against the even narrower personal identification of each nation within its own cultural context.

Culture...altre

Questa storia mi è capitata con un mio amico tedesco, Michael, ai tempi dell’università.

Michael si diceva avido di conoscere altre culture ed imparare cose nuove.

L’ho invitato un’estate a casa mia in Togo.

All’inizio era entusiasta di tutto, ma dopo due giorni si era chiuso in un mutismo totale. Alla mia reiterata insistenza di conoscere la causa di questo pesante silenzio che stava minando la nostra amicizia, egli sbottò nervosamente:

“Ma perché camminate così e fate tutto con tanta lentezza? perdetevi troppo tempo! Perché mangiate tutti assieme nello stesso piatto? Non è igienico! Perché i vostri cortili sono sempre pieni di tanta gente? Così non c’è privacy! Perché non fate come noi, noi... noi...?”

Cercai di spiegargli che questo nostro modo di mangiare diverso, di camminare diverso, di vestirsi diverso erano appunto gli elementi della nostra cultura e che, rifiutando questo, egli in qualche modo rifiutava la mia cultura.

Allora non riusciva a capirmi. Solo al suo ritorno Michael mi dichiarò abbracciandomi all'aeroporto:

“Sai, Kossi, ho imparato una cosa importante in Africa: io sono europeo.”

“Sì, caro Michael” avrei voluto dirgli “stai ancora sbagliando: tu sei tedesco!”. (Komla-Ebri, 2002:55)²

In Komla-Ebri's emphasis on the need to see cultures as parallel, we find a mirror of the decolonial emphasis on the West's hegemonic self-evaluation which exposes the self-referential nature of the European culture while providing the model of an alternative world view, one which offers broader identification with “the question of production of knowledge from a global perspective” (Bhabra, 2014:116). A call for cultural exchanges representative of diversity rather than insularity would be the antidote to the narrow perception of restrictive ‘Italianess’ amongst the younger generation, resulting in an awareness of Italy's own historically abusive colonial past. “Le

² **Other...cultures**

This story happened to me during my university years, during the time of my association with my German friend Michael. Michael used to often say how keen he was to get to know other cultures and to learn new things.

One summer I invited him to my home in Togo.

At first he was enthusiastic about everything, but after two days he had sunk into what could only be called profound mutism. On my repeated enquiries to discover the reason of the heavy silence that had started undermining our friendship, he finally blurted out:

“Why do you walk in this manner and do everything so slowly? You waste so much time. Why do you all eat together from one plate? It's not hygienic! Why are your courtyards always so full of people? There is no privacy! Why don't you do like us, us...us?”

I tried to explain to him that in this manner of our different eating style, our different way of walking, our different way of dressing resided our culture and, in rejecting this, he was in some fundamental way rejecting my culture.

But at that moment he wasn't able to fully absorb my meaning. Only on our arrival back to the airport in Italy did Michael explain himself. Embracing me, he said:

“You know Kossi, I have learnt a very important thing in Africa: that I am European.”

“Yes, my dear Michael”, I thought of replying “you are still wrong there: you are German!”

ragioni della speranza” illustrates this point by comparing, almost in vignette form, the generational attitudes of the mother and son, the potential “colour blindness” of youth with the irrationally prejudiced older generation:

Le ragioni della speranza

Salendo sull'autobus, sentii gridare ancora prima di vederlo, un ragazzino di una scuola in cui ero andato a parlare dell'Africa:

“Kossi, ciao Kossi!”

Girai la testa in direzione della sua voce e lo vidi strattonato da sua madre che mi squadro con gli occhi diffidenti, mentre si abbassava per dirgli concitatamente qualche cosa a bassa voce. Lo sentii ribattere ad alta voce con la faccia stupita:

“Ma, mamma è Kossi!” (Komla-Ebri, 2002:37)³

In its exposure of the underlying racism of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ that defines the racial polarisation of attitudes in present day Italy, the writer is serving, in minor key, Mignolo’s, notion of “epistemic disobedience” achieved by “de-linking from the Western idea of modernity” (2009:3) so often defined in its stratification of cultural hierarchy. Therefore, the stories are far more trenchant and focused on a specific level of social integration between groups making up current Italian, or European, societies in general.

The title of the book, *Imbarazzismi*, is a neologism that exemplifies, according to the author, the dominant idea running through the book; the sense of ‘embarrassment’ arising out of a

³ **Reasons for hope**

On boarding the bus, I heard, even before catching sight of him, the loud greeting of a young boy from the school where I had gone to speak about Africa:

“Kossi, hi Kossi.”

I turned my head in the direction of the voice and saw his arm being jerked by his mother, who eyed me with profound suspicion, while leaning down to say something urgently to him in a low voice.

I heard him answer his mom loudly, an incredulous expression on his face:

“But mom, it’s Kossi.”

perception of diversity, understood essentially as the 'difference' associated with skin colour. This 'difference', appearing as it does here in the Italian cultural environment which is not familiar with such diversity on a daily basis, leads to scenarios in which migrants and locals find themselves clashing on the periphery of both embarrassment and racism⁴:

La gaffe

Il mio amico nigeriano Dan fa l'ingegnere di mestiere e vive in Toscana. Tempo fa, ebbe un incarico dal tribunale come consulente tecnico per una perizia. Uno dei consulenti di parte era un ingegnere livornese di mezza età. I livornesi sono singolari per la loro spontaneità (talvolta ironici) e si dice (alla faccia dei luoghi comuni) che sono abituati a trattare con il mondo senza pregiudizi.

Per farla breve, la prima sessione di lavoro avvenne dopo un contatto telefonico. Il nostro livornese sentì il suo buon italiano con accento toscano e quindi non si accorse di nulla.

Due giorni dopo si incontrarono nell'ufficio di Dan. Si presentarono e parve tutto ok: si trovò davanti un giovane architetto "di colore" e da buon livornese riuscì a gestire la sorpresa egregia.

Dan, da parte sua, cercò di metterlo a suo agio trattando argomenti sociali, politici e, ovviamente, parlando di calcio.

L'ingegnere livornese volle sapere dove aveva conseguito la laurea e altre cose sulle sue esperienze professionali. Rassicurato, si prodigò in complimenti e non nascose il suo stupore per la sua conoscenza delle tematiche italiane.

Ormai in confidenza, l'ingegnere si sfoga su quanto la sinistra abbia rovinato questo paese (crede molto nella

⁴ I am thankful to Dr. Komla-Ebri for this insight gleaned in a private conversation during his lecture tour of Pretoria, South Africa, in 2012.

meritocrazia più che nell'uguaglianza e negli stessi diritti per tutti).

Non poteva di certo sapere che Dan era impegnato come assessore in un'amministrazione di sinistra.

Ormai lanciato, continua su quanto si lavora in questo paese; e solo per pagare le tasse.

“Ti fai un culo come un negro e non riesci a sbarcare il lunario. È inaccettabile...”

Si accorge della gaffe.

Dan si mette a ridere... Lui, in crisi... nera. (Komla-Ebri, 2004:21-22)⁵

In its careful identification of the strands of anti-immigrant sensibilities, the writing of Komla-Ebri underlines Fanon's affirmation that “Europe has a racist structure, [...] for the myth of the bad nigger is part of the collective unconscious” (Fanon,

⁵ **The Blunder**

My Nigerian friend, Dan, is an engineer by profession and lives in Tuscany. A while ago he was appointed by the town council as technical advisor on behalf of a consulting firm. One of the other consultants was a middle-aged engineer from Leghorn. People from this city are unusual because of their often ironic spontaneity and it is said (in spite of all that is said about clichés) that they are used to dealing with people without prejudice.

To cut a long story short, the first phase of the job followed an initial telephonic exchange. Our friend from Leghorn only heard Dan's excellent, slightly Tuscan accented, Italian and didn't notice anything.

Two days later they met in Dan's office. They introduced each other and everything seemed ok: the man standing before him an architect 'of colour', and true to form, barely noticed the fact.

Dan, from his side, tried to put him at ease by chatting about social and political issues as well as, obviously, football.

The engineer from Leghorn asked where Dan had got his degree and made other enquiries on his professional experience. Now feeling reassured, he proffered many compliments and commented on Dan's vast grasp of Italian issues.

By this stage already almost friends, the engineer raved on how the left had ruined this country (he believed greatly in meritocracy rather than in equality and in equal rights for all).

There was no way that he could have imagined that Dan was a counsellor affiliated to a left-wing administration.

Having embarked on this topic, however, he continued complaining about the hard work one had to put in, in Italy, just to be able to pay your taxes.

“You sweat like a Negro and you don't manage to make ends meet, it's completely unacceptable...”

He realised his *faux pas*.

Dan started laughing, while the engineer sank into the darkest pit of shame!

1986:92). In the story "Paura doppia", the amusing vignette identifies this very serious racial prejudice in a light-hearted manner but one which, nonetheless, identifies the serious emotional violence associated with the notion of the feared 'Other':

Paura doppia

Vidi la piccola Francesca entrare in sala prelievi, terrorizzata, con i suoi begli occhioni azzurri gonfi di lacrime, stratonata dalla madre:

"Franci, non farmi fare brutta figura! Guarda che è gentile questo dottore ..."

Questo dottore ero io.

Povera bimba, da quando era nata l'avevano sempre ammonita: Se non fai la brava viene l'uomo nero che ti porta via!, oppure: Se non fai la brava chiamo il dottore che ti fa la puntura! E lì, di colpo, vedendo materializzarsi tutt'e due i suoi incubi in una volta sola, la sua paura non poteva che essere ... doppia.

Pensai di scherzare per metterla a suo agio:

"Francesca ... non aver paura, sai... ho già mangiato!"

Fu allora che scoppiò davvero in un pianto a dirotto. (Komla-Ebri, 2004:25-26)⁶

⁶ **Double Terror**

I saw little Francesca enter the room where blood samples were taken from patients, in a state of complete terror, her beautiful blue eyes swollen with tears, forcefully dragged along by her mother:

"Franki, please don't let me down! This doctor is kind."

I, in fact, was "this doctor".

Poor little girl! Ever since birth she had been threatened with such sayings as; "if you aren't good the black man will take you away!", or "if you aren't good I'll call the doctor to come and give you an injection!"

And there, all at once, seeing both her nightmares materialising in one go, her fear could be nothing but be ... doubled up.

I tried to joke with her to make her feel more comfortable;

"Francesca, don't be scared... I've already eaten!"

And then she really burst out in uncontrollable sobs.

Often, however, the difference is also couched in terms of power imbalance and not simply on the level of difference of appearance. In these instances, the 'inferiority' of the recipient of the prejudice is framed within the expectation imbedded in preconceived prejudice. In the following story, the irrationality of prejudice becomes the focus of an example of extensive societal disharmony:

Sindrome da “vù-cumprà”

Tornando da scuola, Gratus passò per il centro perché doveva comprare dei quaderni in una cartoleria.

Appena lui con il suo borsone entrò nel negozio, il commerciante gli venne incontro con mani e palme aperte dicendo:

“No, grazie, non compriamo niente!”

“Ok!” disse Gratus “ma io, posso comprare dei quaderni?” (Komla-Ebri, 2002:39)⁷

The style of narration, although filled with irony and humour, is aimed at providing amusement for the reader while also urging him or her to rethink their daily resident-cum-migrant relationships and their daily engagement with the 'Other'. The clash can also take the form of 'kindness' but is still prejudice for who is perceived to be 'Other' due simply to his skin colour. The story below is a case in point:

Aggiungi un posto a tavola

La famiglia di un'amica di Marzia, una donna molto, molto religiosa, vedeva spesso a messa un giovane “di colore” in piedi in fondo alla chiesa. Era ormai dicembre e i genitori della sua amica pensarono che sarebbe stato

⁷ **The “do you want to buy” syndrome**

On his way back from school, needing to buy some exercise books from the stationary store, Gratus went through the centre of town.

As he entered the shop holding his big duffle bag, the store manager came towards him in an attempt to ward him off, saying:

“No thank you, we are not buying anything!”

“Ok!” replied Gratus, “that may be the case, but I need to buy some exercise books.”

un gesto di cristiana carità invitare a pranzo quel ragazzo qualche giorno prima di Natale. Vedendolo sempre solo, in disparte, avevano “capito” che si trattava di uno di quei ragazzi africani venuti a frequentare la loro “prestigiosa” università (oh, fonte d’ogni sapienza!) e che quindi avrebbe sicuramente passato le feste di Natale pressoché solo.

Lo invitarono così a pranzo e lui accettò di buon grado. Quando furono tutti seduti attorno al tavolo, gli chiesero da dove veniva e cosa faceva in Italia. La risposta, semplice e senza ombra di rimprovero, fu: “Sono l’ambasciatore della Guinea Bissau in Italia.”

L’amica di Marzia non riuscì a contare i minuti di imbarazzatissimo silenzio che seguirono quella sconvolgente “rivelazione”... (Komla-Ebri, 2004:11)⁸

Therefore, the question arising out of “race and coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2007:171), in which the hierarchy based on ‘race’ is responsible for the categorisation of people on a network of power relations, is shown by Komla-Ebri as a day-to-day set of perceived hierarchies serving as a backdrop to dominant and subordinate social groups in their continued social interaction. Often, the condescension is far more trenchant and destructive, with the prejudice being categorisation into a seemingly irreversible power imbalance. In the following story, the social incomprehension that results from a

⁸ **Add a place at the table**

The family of a friend of Marcia’s, who is an extremely religious woman, often saw a young man ‘of colour’ who stood alone at the back of the church. It was now December and her friend’s parents felt that it would be a gesture of Christian charity to invite that young man for dinner a few days before Christmas. Seeing that he was always alone they had ‘gathered’ that he must be one of those foreign African students who attended the ‘prestigious’ university (alas, well of all knowledge) and would therefore have had to spend Christmas alone.

They therefore invited him and he accepted with pleasure. When they were all seated around the dinner table, they enquired where he came from and what he was doing in Italy. The answer, simply put and with no shadow of recrimination, was:

“I am the Ambassador of Guinea Bissau to Italy.”

Marcia’s friend couldn’t be sure of how many minutes ticked by in highly embarrassed silence following this amazing revelation...

Western, hierarchical vantage point of dominance over the African identity, which Quijano labels the “exotic” in Western framing, makes for the exchange to be belittling to the receiver while also demonstrative of deep ignorance from the part of the purveyor:

Intercultura e vergogna

La ‘signora maestra’ perorava con gli occhi fuori dalla montatura:

“Vede, in classe abbiamo un ragazzino di colore e vorremmo approfittare della sua presenza per fare dell’intercultura ma... niente da fare. L’altro ieri gli ho chiesto di dirci una parola in africano e lui, silenzio totale.”

Concluse sagacemente:

“Secondo me si vergogna delle sue origini!”

Può anche darsi, ma cara maestra mia, mi dica lei una parola in ‘europeo’! (Komla-Ebri, 2002:59)⁹

The hegemony both of social prominence and linguistic supremacy on the part of the Italian teacher is deflated and mocked, allowing the reader to identify the fallacy at the bottom of nationalistic perceptions that are so often taught uncritically to children. Related is Quijano’s “question of the production of knowledge” (172), in which the idea of the centrality of the ‘subject’ as “a category referring to the isolated individual” is set against the exteriorisation of the ‘object’ seen as “a category referring to an entity not only different from the ‘subject’ [...] but external to the latter by its nature” (172). This distinction is fundamental to the archetypal definition of the ‘Us’ and ‘Them’,

⁹ **Inter-culture and shame**

The school teacher scanned the room with her eyes, looking over the rim of her glasses.

“You see, we have a boy of colour in our class and we wanted to take advantage of his presence in order to pursue some intercultural comparisons...but nothing doing! Two days ago I asked him to give us an African word but he said nothing, complete silence.”

She concluded with great wisdom:

“I think that he is ashamed of his origins!”

Perhaps that is true. However, dear teacher, will you please say a word in ‘European’!

through which colonial organisation was able to structure its continuing social power dynamics. In the story “Ora di punta”, a familiar urban scenario is broken down into its constituent levels of racial prejudice in a way that is both identifiable and deeply shaming for the dominant cultural ideology at play in every Italian city:

Ora di punta

Stavo andando in autobus verso il centro in un'ora di punta.

Con un po' di fatica, trovai un posto in fondo, aggrappandomi alla maniglia dell'ultima sedia vicino alla macchina obliteratrice dei biglietti.

Ad una fermata, un gruppo di chiassosi giovinastri, si accingeva a scendere dalla porta posteriore, intralciando e spingendo così coloro che cercavano di entrare.

Irritato ed esasperato, un signore che cercava disperatamente di salire, li apostrofò, inveendo al loro scherno:

“Scemi! Si scende dal davanti! Idiotti! Imbecilli! Selvaggi!”

“Balu...ba!”

Nel pronunciare quest'ultimo epiteto, il suo sguardo cadde su di me. Nel silenzio gelido passò un angelo con le ali imbrattate di vergogna e le gote rosse d'imbarazzo.

Chissà cosa avranno mai fatto quei... “Baluba”? Non parliamo poi degli “Zulù”! (Komla-Ebri, 2002:11)¹⁰

¹⁰ **Peak hour**

I was travelling on the bus during peak hour, heading towards the centre of town. After considerable effort, gripping the overhead strap with some difficulty, I finally found a seat right at the back of the bus, next to the ticket machine.

At one of the stops, a group of rowdy school children was clustering around the back door, waiting to disembark, thereby pushing and shoving those trying to get onto the bus.

Exasperated and very irritated, a gentleman who was vainly trying to get onto the bus, turned on them, accusingly:

“Fools! You must get off from the front! Idiots! Imbeciles! Savages! Balu...bas.”

In pronouncing the latter epithet, his gaze fell on me. In the chilly silence that followed this outburst, an angel, his wings besmirched with shame and his cheeks red with embarrassment, flew by.

Who knows what those “Balubas” had done? Let's not even mention the “Zulus”!

The reversal of the dichotomy of cultured west pitted against 'dark Africa' polarises the attitudes and, like all parody, focuses on the absurdity of the hegemonic view. Likewise, Quijano's definition of the Western notion of "totality in knowledge" (Quijano, 2007:174) in which the comparison of society to the human body suggests the correlation between the disparate parts as essential for the functioning of the whole, is brought into play. In this metaphoric framing, the brain, associated with the dominant power, maintains a stronghold over the limbs, or subservient nations, which provide the muscle. The levels of inequality, disguised as constituent parts of the human totality, are exposed in the expectations described in the following story, in which the immigrant's automatic inferiority in mental ability is exposed as a default position on the part of the Italian *carabiniere*:

Questione di QI

Quando mi fu concessa la cittadinanza italiana, il maresciallo della stazione locale dei carabinieri, nel complimentarsi con me, puntualizzò:

"Ora dovrà fare il servizio militare."

"Maresciallo, io sono contro la guerra... tutte le guerre!"

"Ma no! E solo pro forma. Vista la sua età, dovrà solo presentarsi per la visita."

Tirai un profondo sospiro di sollievo e il giorno convenuto mi recai alla caserma militare.

Mi trovai un po' a disagio in mezzo a tutti quei giovanastri con la peluria nascente che purtroppo dovevano assolvere quest'assurdo impegno: imparare a uccidere altri esseri umani.

Fummo subito introdotti da un giovane militare (sergente? Non ricordo) in una grande aula per rispondere a un questionario.

Durante l'appello egli ci minacciò:

"State buoni e calmi se no ve la vedrete con me!"

Con pazienza compilai l'assurdo questionario a risposte multiple, che mi chiedeva cose del tipo: Hai mai sentito una voce che ti diceva: "Alzati e vai a salvare la patria"? Oppure: Credi che senza la paura di una sanzione, la gente sarebbe naturalmente onesta? e altre domande ancora più allucinanti.

Il giovane ritirò il "compitino" per portarlo alla psicologa.

Mentre eravamo tutti in fila, con addosso solo gli slip e in attesa della visita medica per la "palpazione", mi sentii chiamare dalla voce tonante del nostro giovane militare:

"Koossi Koomm..."

"Sono io" risposi per evitargli di torturare impietosamente il mio cognome.

"Si risponde: presente!"

"Presente!" ripetei docilmente.

"Cosa c'è?" chiesi incamminandomi dietro di lui in quella tenuta.

"Ti vuole vedere la psicologa!"

"Ah?"

"Sì, perché... sicuramente tu non conoscere bene l'italiano: hai risposto a caso ed è venuto fuori che tu avere un QI superiore alla media... quindi devi rifare il questionario."

"Ah! Bene!" dissi e per un attimo mi parve di scorgere nel cortile un angelo nero sghignazzante, in gonnella di paglia con un ossicino nel naso, che ballava lancia in mano, a suon di tamtam attorno a un pentolone sul fuoco. (Komla-Ebri, 2004:5-6)¹¹

¹¹ **A Question of IQ**

When I obtained my Italian citizenship, the officer at the police station, while congratulating me, pointed out the following:

"You are now going to have to do military service."

"Officer, I am against war, any sort of war!"

"No. It's only symbolic. Due to your age you will only have to go for the regulation medical examination."

I heaved a sigh of relief and on the required day I headed for the military barracks.

The ironic distancing implied by this mode of writing enables the individual to become a 'type' and therefore to assess his or her attitude with critical distance. The author says: these encounters are underscored by subliminal attitudes that expose the general public's thick layering of preconceived notions, either latently or unconsciously racist, but nonetheless still potentially negatively impacting on the enablement of long-term social harmony¹². Is the choice of Komla-Ebri's writing style and narrative content another way of not simply bridging the divide between the immigrant and the native Italian, but also a means for the production of awareness that redefines the social relationship in a manner that will alleviate ignorance towards the many 'alternative' diasporas that find themselves in Italy today?

I felt ill at ease amongst those pubescent lads who were, to their misfortune, required to perform the absurd task of being trained to kill other human beings.

On arrival we were taken by a young military officer (a sergeant perhaps, but I don't rightly remember) to a large hall where we were instructed to fill in a questionnaire.

During the roll call he warned us:

"Be calm and attentive otherwise you'll have to deal with me!"

I patiently filled in the absurd multiple choice questionnaire filled with absurd questions like: *Have you ever heard a voice telling you to "Rise and save your fatherland"?* Or *"Do you believe that without the fear of consequences people would be naturally honest"?* and other even more unbelievably inane conundrums.

The young man collected the "essay" in order to take it along to the psychologist.

As we stood in the queue, waiting for the medical examination, wearing only our boxer shorts, I heard my name being loudly called out by the young officer:

"Koossi Koomm..."

"That's me," I answered, hoping to stop him from cruelly torturing my surname any further.

"You are supposed to say: 'Present'!"

"Present" I replied with docility.

"What's wrong?" I asked him as I followed in my getup.

"The psychologist wants to see you!"

"Oh?"

"Yes, because...surely you do not know Italian well enough: you answered randomly and it worked out that you have a higher than average IQ ... so you must redo the questionnaire."

"Oh! Fine", I replied and for a moment I thought I saw a sniggering black angel in the courtyard, wearing a grass skirt and sporting a little bone in his nose, who was dancing to the sound of the jungle drum around a cauldron on top of a fire, brandishing a spear in his hand.

¹² I thank Dr. Komla-Ebri for this notion.

In the following story the gradations of language determine not only the competence of the African immigrant but also his unstated hierarchical status in the host society. Echoing Fanon's claim that the "negro [...] will *come closer to being a real human being* – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language" (1986:18), the following exchange exemplifies the notion in all its absurdity:

Aspettando l'autobus

Un'amica eritrea e un signore italiano erano ad aspettare tutt'e due l'autobus n° 25.

"Quest'autobus è sempre in ritardo!"

"È vero! Meno male che oggi non piove."

E per venti minuti andarono avanti a parlare del tempo e della scomparsa della mezza stagione poi lui s'informò:

"Lei parla italiano?"

Lei rimase esterrefatta:

"Mi scusi signore, ma in che lingua abbiamo parlato fino adesso?". (Komla-Ebri, 2004:15-16)¹³

The two collections offer many correlations between decolonial theory and the demands levelled by foreign communities in most modern Western societies, in which inequality has lost its clearly defined outline due to the ambivalence of the 'purity' of their postcolonial achievements. These works, therefore, should have a very important place in Italian culture by virtue of the fact that they

¹³ **Waiting for the bus**

An Eritrean friend and an Italian gentleman were both waiting for bus No.25

"This bus is always late!"

"Very true! Thank goodness it isn't raining today."

And for the next twenty minutes they chatted about the weather and the disappearance of the mid-season when he suddenly enquired:

"Do you speak Italian?"

She was flabbergasted.

"Excuse me, sir, but what language have we been speaking till now?"

deal with the meaning of identity in the face of cultural diversity. Speaking of literary writing as something that:

[...] does not only restrict itself to being an instrument of knowledge about others but which is also an instrument of self-knowledge. Our identity is not a static phenomenon; it is not something that we keep frozen in the freezer. Identity changes with the environment. It changes with the culture where we are immersed. Our identity changes with the education we receive at home, at school, with our friends and relationships.¹⁴

In this sense his books postulate a foundation for what can be defined an essential human need – the ability to live together without the divisory barriers of race. In dissecting the notions of identity in Italy today, Komla-Ebri's writing has the power to imaginatively and creatively popularise the emotional and political themes that define decoloniality for the average Italian reader, the one who would not attempt the more specialised readings of these highly politicised theorists, who by their very nature, remain on the 'outside' of the popular Italian discussion forum.

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¹⁴ Transcript of the speech sent to the translator by the author.

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