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Black Italia

Migrant Voices from Africa

ABSTRACT

Through the centuries, historical and fictional characters of African descent have been an integral part of Italian culture at large – from Hannibal to Othello, to ‘Faccetta Nera’, up to present-day immigrants. Yet their presence, in history as much as in the arts, has often been marginalized, or considered episodic, if not entirely overlooked by Italy’s dominant discourse.

The recent arrival of a plethora of immigrants from the four corners of the world, many of whom from African countries, has urged Italians to recuperate their African past as an essential, and often problematic, component of their national identity. Yet historical sources appear fragmentary and often interpolated. How to re-compose the neglected African Italian heritage?

A number of artists from the African diaspora, coming from different backgrounds, have recently tried to answer this question with their creative works. Art has succeeded in filling history’s gaps. Imagination provides connection, inclusion, and the possibility of cultural transmission. By giving voice and visibility to those who have been silenced and made invisible by mainstream history, an array of contemporary artists is contributing to the recollection, and the re-creation, of a crucial, largely ignored aspect of Italian culture. Among them are a number of writers, whose flourishing literary production has been reshaping Italian contemporary letters.

By examining some of these writers’ most recent productions, my study explores old and new forms of interaction between Africa and Italian cultures and arts. Moving from the analysis of the first three book-length narratives written in Italian by authors of African origins in 1990 – *Io, venditore di elefanti* (I, the elephant seller), by Senegalese Pap Khouma; *Immigrato* (Immigrant), by Tunisian Salah Methani; and *Chiamatemi Ali* (Call me Ali), by Moroccan Mohamed Bouchane – my presentation today especially focuses on some recent short stories by Uxax Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego, both women writers of Somali origins. All these as well as other texts differently address and call for a critical investigation of issues of color, race, gender, class, hegemony, nationality, citizenship, post/colonialism, identity, borders, language, agency and representation. Far from giving univocal definitions of these terms, my analysis contextualizes and defines them, by putting them in relation to each other, thus hoping to contribute to a reassessment of the importance of the African heritage in the formation of Italian cultural identity.