

**COMING TO TERMS WITH OUR COLONIAL PAST:  
REGINA DI FIORI E DI PERLE  
BY GABRIELLA GHERMANDI**

**GIOVANNA SANSALVADORE**  
(University of South Africa)

**Sommario**

*Il romanzo Regina di fiori e di perle (2007) di Gabriella Ghermandi presenta due filoni narrativi: quello nel quale vengono raccolti oralmente i racconti dei testimoni degli anni coloniali sotto il fascismo, e quello del bildungsroman, nel quale il personaggio principale, Mahlet, cresce e si rende conto del proprio destino di cantora per il popolo. L'opera ricostruisce sia la crescita di Mahlet fino al rientro in Etiopia dopo gli anni trascorsi all'università di Bologna, che i cambiamenti sociali e storici del suo paese attraverso i traguardi principali della storia etiopica (dai giorni dell'invasione italiana fino ai giorni nostri). L'autrice presenta al lettore un intreccio di racconti e di voci che esplicitano la realtà dell'esperienza coloniale e di quella post-coloniale nell'Italia contemporanea.*

A review of the relationship between Italy and its erstwhile colonies in Africa has been much delayed both in the critical debate and in public consciousness (“[...] the post colonial moment has been, so to say, suspended and delayed”)<sup>1</sup> (Ponzanesi, 2004:29). Much has been made of this historical neglect and many viewpoints have been offered in explanation: because the relationship between Italy and her former colonies “[...] has remained peripheral to the core of the economic and social life of [the] nation” (Leone, 2010:13), the will to address the colonial question and the guilt of Italian involvement in atrocities in northern Africa was therefore more easily dealt with by silence and denial; the relatively short period of the Italian colonial

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] il momento postcoloniale è stato come dire sospeso e rimandato.” Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

enterprise as well as its historical link primarily with the Fascist dictatorship welded colonial events to the latter historical period and allowed it to be forgotten by the mainstream post war rebuilding (Jedlowski, 2011:113). Although, as indicated by Itala Vivian in her paper, “Reading Africa in Italy. The reception of African literatures in fifty years of African independence, 1960-2010” – to be found in this journal – the intellectual debate around Italian postcolonial issues had already started prior to the 1990s in academic circles, public cognizance of these events, as well as their written focus, was to arise later. According to Daniele Comberiati the main push towards the production of a literature of migration was the murder of the young South Africa itinerant labourer, Jerry Masslo, in a racial attack in Villa Literno, province of Caserta, in 1989 (2007:2). In the wake of this incident Italian public opinion began to address the necessity of rights for émigrés, particularly those coming from the former Italian colonies in Africa. The resultant so called Martelli Law of 1990 granted refugee status to émigrés from regions outside of Italy. With the ever growing numbers of refugees coming into Italy from the 1990s onwards (Boswell, 2005:2) the appraisal of the confrontation with this important aspect of Italian history became a pressing necessity. Another perspective, which finds an echo in the form of Ghermandi’s novel itself, gives another slant to the late development of this debate. Socio emotional aspects of time and historical distancing highlight the position of migration literature within a healing process similar to that affecting the individual psyche in its confrontation with, and resolution of, individual trauma. While on a personal level the confrontation of trauma and the resolution of pain are able to be speeded up to coincide with the individual’s personal perceptions, the nature of collective memory is a great deal more complex:

Personal processes of the elaboration of mourning sometimes takes years, but are achieved (or fail) in one lifespan. On the contrary, for an intergroup reconciliation to be achieved, *more than one generation is needed.* (Original italics) (Leone, 2010:16)

Seen in these socio-dynamic terms, the number of years necessary for this confrontation to formulate itself were an inescapable part of the national process of awareness.<sup>2</sup> The viewpoint of the ‘Other’, both from the perspective of the colonizer as well as that of the colonized, can only be integrated within the fibre of mainstream literature after the lapse of a certain period of time and coinciding with the passing of a requisite number of generations:

[...] the vast majority of ordinary people of both groups have performed a long elaboration – to the point that they can see their relations with the other group in a new way – in which memories of past violence have not disappeared, but have taken a different and somehow less important (“marginal”) place. (Leone, 2005:17)

The process of remembering and recapturing of the narratives of family heroism – a first stage in the gathering of the socio-emotional material that forms historical memory – told by the witness to younger generations, is a charged message that conveys personal bravery intended to “[...] consolidate a positive idea of the family [...]” (Leone, 2010:190). The next stage, “[...] as the death of living witnesses approaches, the need for a linkage of these war memories to more enduring intermediations arises too” (Leone, 2010:190), creating a need for extending the memories to a new generation. As we will see, Ghermandi’s novel utilizes a similar model.

The literature of migration in Italy today, arising out of the void that should have been occupied by this historical debate shortly after the era in which the events took place, may be seen as a part of this social and emotional renewal and occupies an important step in the general process of reconciliation. The need for story telling relating to the Italian colonial past goes hand in hand with an evaluation of the realities of the émigrés life, both the present conditions and the past injustices:

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<sup>2</sup> Active suppression of information has been, however, exercised by the Italian state over the years (Jedlowski, 2011).

In these novels the stories of Somalis or Ethiopians, of migrants, of Italians in the colonies and of Italians today are intertwined: this history is undeniably a *common* history. Memory, it is suggested, should be *common* as well.<sup>3</sup> (Original italics) (Jedlowski, 2011)

This perspective is identified by the novel itself, laying emphasis as it does on healing and on the historical importance of the generational chain of relevance associated with the story telling process itself.

The literature of migration in Italy today offers a number of disparate discourses: the returned immigrant whose journey back to Italy reverses the original conquest; the female figure<sup>4</sup> finding a definition both of her own identity as well as her position as émigré in the land of the conqueror; the complex issues surrounding the cultural fusions/fissions associated with what has been termed *méttisage*, as in the character of Lindiwe in Valentina Acava's *Cercando Lindiwe* (2007). The most important thing, however, is that "The colonial narrative is [...] being redefined by the returned gaze of African immigrants in Italy who have started writing about their past, their countries and their encounter with Italy" (Ponzanesi, 2004:109).

Gabriella Ghermandi, Ethiopian born writer and now resident in her father's native Bologna, makes interesting and very innovative examples of many of these literary concerns. *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) is a multifaceted and artistically sophisticated work that encompasses many differing writing techniques and brings a new, and unexpected, vocal element to the traditional Italian novel. In her quest to find a means of recounting the colonial events of the Italian presence in Ethiopia, Ghermandi broadens her perspective beyond the events of the colonial period and looks at a broader framework in which confluent issues – both past and present – are evaluated. In

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<sup>3</sup> "In questi romanzi le storie di Somali o etiopi, di migranti, di italiani nelle colonie e di italiani oggi, si intrecciano: la storia è innegabilmente una storia in *commune*. La memoria, si suggerisce, dovrebbe esserlo altrettanto."

<sup>4</sup> Silvia Contarini's argument (2010:119-159), that much of female Italian postcolonial writing can be identified with the *genre* of autobiography, is highly relevant to Ghermandi's novel both in form as well as narrative content.

order to recount the various phases of resistance, suppression and relocation, Ghermandi's book charts a course through a swathe of history: The Battle of Adwa (March 1st, 1896) and the years of Menelik's rule (1889-1911); the 1936 Italian invasion of Eritrea and the horrors of the Graziani reprisals after the failed assassination attempt of 1937; the years of Haile Selassie I's rule (1928-1975) the dictatorship under Mengistu Haile Mariam – who ruled with the Derg from 1975 to 1991; the exploitation of African workers in Italian households in the 1990s; and life in present day Ethiopia, to which the main character returns at the end of the novel.

So as to fully capture and address the multifaceted experience of the émigré both going to and returning from Italy the novel uses a two pronged approach; recapturing the stories of the historical struggle of the colonial years on the one hand and the conveyance of history through the narrative process on the other. The first prong of the dual story relates to the character Mahlet's childhood promise to her great uncle Yacob that she will tell the tales of her country's valour against the Fascist invasion so that these stories will remain part of the social and historical memory ("Sarai la voce della nostra storia che non vuole essere dimenticata"/"You will be the voice of our history that refuses to be forgotten") (Ghermandi:2007:6). In the words of Yacob:

Un giorno sarai la nostra voce che racconta. Attraverserai il mare che hanno attraversato Pietro e Paolo e porterai le nostre storie nella terra degli italiani.<sup>5</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:6)

The narrative process – understood as a tool for witnessing historical events – is also a process for remembering and passing on these personal stories, the artistic funnelling of stories into the national tale of the Ethiopian people and, finally, onto the international arena with its confrontation with present day Italy. The promise to take the individual stories to the former colonial 'master' is a binding and quasi sacred enterprise:

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<sup>5</sup> One day you will be our voice that recounts. You will cross the sea that was travelled by Peter and Paul and you will take our stories to the land of the Italians.

Allora prometti davanti alla Madonna dell'icona. Quando sarai grande scriverai la mia storia, la storia di quegli anni e la porterai nel paese degli italiani, per non dare loro la possibilità di scordare.<sup>6</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:57)

The *figura* of Mahlet as narrator, collector of tales as well as writer, thus becomes the focus for the narrative process. Her first hand gathering of tales from the living witnesses takes a large part of the book. Just as in the historical process itself the passing on of the individual's personal story takes place from the living witness to the next generation, in the novel the stories pass from the many witnesses to the young cantor Mahlet, thereby metaphorizing a process of memorial transferral at the core of the narrative process. Again in the words of Yacob "You will be the voice of our history that refuses to be forgotten" (Ghermandi, 2007:6). From the moment of her childhood promise to Yacob – the narrative event that opens the book – to the moment at the end of the novel, when Mahlet actually starts writing down the collected stories, the second narrative strand is a *bildungsroman* that traces the parallel story of her growing up and coming to consciousness as a young woman of mixed heritage through her charted life trajectory; the years spent growing up in Ethiopia, years in Italy as a university student and finally the return to her native land and the eventual acceptance of her role of cantor for her people.

While the first strand of narrative of the novel grapples with the voice of the colonizer in the latter's violent confrontation with the conquered country, the second – Mahlet's coming to consciousness as a writer and cantor – empowers the voice of the colonized in the latter's quest for personal identity in the postcolonial reality. Thus, the novel goes beyond the form of the *bildungsroman*, becoming the expression of a national identity in its confrontation with the former oppressor. These two narrative strands also represent two distinct

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<sup>6</sup> Then promise in front of the Madonna of the icon. When you are grown up you will write my story, the story of those years and you will take it in the country of the Italians, so as not to give them the chance to forget.

historical moments in the memory of the Italian colonial experience. While the first records the valorous resistance of the suppressed people in their fight against the invader, finding its representative in the figure of the *arbegnà* or warrior Yacob, the latter narrative strand finds its meaning in the wisdom garnered from the events, the lessons learnt and the personal identities formulated by the experience of the colonized in their forward looking journey for the grandchildren and the later generations. In this way Ghermandi's narrative multiplicity encompasses a broader and more universal experience, enabling the colonized people to make themselves heard in a memorial process that is usually unilaterally reserved for the dominant power, usually the ones who write History and tell the tales of conquest.

*Regina di fiori e di perle* opens with the traditional fairy tale form of the once upon a time formula ("Quando ero piccolo [...]")<sup>7</sup> where narrative distance is created from which to launch the string of stories that take up the rest of the book. In the first section of the novel, which serves as the framing device for the rest of the book, the child Mahlet is guided by Yacob along a narrative path of discovery. As in many children's stories, the tales are unlocked from a secret repository, where a talismanic object allows entry into a quasi-magic narrative world:

Ragni e ragnatele in ogni buco e in ogni angolo della stanza. Infine, ai piedi della rete un baule dipinto con uno smalto verde, scrostato in taluni punti, e chiuso da due enormi lucchetti color ottone.

La mente mi si accese.

Chissà cosa c'era dentro? Forse i segreti della vita del vecchio Yacob.<sup>8</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:8)

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<sup>7</sup> "When I was small [...]"

<sup>8</sup> Spiders and spider webs in every hole and in every corner of the room. Finally, at the foot of the bed a chest painted with peeling green enamel, sealed with two enormous brass clasps. My mind lit up. I wonder what is inside. Perhaps the life secrets of the old Yacob.

In the imagination of the little girl, the excitement of the ‘life secrets’ of Yacob are source of curiosity and play. In reality, indeed, these talismans will be exactly that; the life secrets of Yacob, but the end to which they are put will be the ultimate reconciliation involved in the process of historical re-evaluation. The lessons learnt from that life story – the principles of tolerance and respect – destroyed by the colonial enterprise, must be retraced and reframed. Along with the fictional Mahlet, the reader follows the tentative steps of discovery along the narrative adventure story. The wardrobe of C.S. Lewis’ *Narnia* is transmuted into Yacob’s ancient traveller’s chest in which the yellowed document from the days of the Fascist rule of Ethiopia – the despised fascist letter of submission – is to be used as the key for the unlocking of the process of collective memory:

Ricominciai da capo. Se c’era qualcosa lo avrei trovato.  
Alla terza volta avertii un crepito che proveniva dal  
taschino di una camicia. Slacciai il bottone, vi infilai una  
mano e in fondo, arrotolata, trovai una busta.  
Mi sentivo vittoriosa. La tirai fuori e la sventolai ridendo  
sotto il naso al vecchio Yacob.<sup>9</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:8)

The ignominious talisman, carefully preserved from the days of the Italian regime, sets in motion the first story of the book, that of old Yacob himself, whose tale revolves around the love affair across racial barriers of his sister Amarech and her Italian lover Daniele, and localises the birth of Mahlet, who is his great grandniece. Thus, within the frame of the story is also to be found the boundaries of its protagonists: the oldest, Yacob, the hero *arbegna* – or warrior patriot – and the youngest, the future cantor Mahlet, whose agency will enable the memorial flow and will thus form a chain of continuity with the lost pre colonial world which the Italians destroyed and which Yacob represents. The living witness of the first stage of

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<sup>9</sup> I began again. If there was something I would have found it. On my third attempt I noticed a rustling that came from the pocket of a shirt. I undid the button, stuck my hand into the pocket and, right at the bottom, I found a rolled up envelope. I felt victorious. I pulled it out and waved it, laughing, under the nose of the old man Yacob.

reconciliation passes the personal experience onto a new generation, who in turn will nurture and pass on the experience along with the lessons learnt from the stories.

In between these two temporal boundaries flow the other stories, in a complex funnelling from the years of the Italian invasion to the more recent stories of change in the confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized in a multiplicity of nuanced settings and inter-personal and social-relations that cover the spectrum of the Italian colonial experience. In the two main sections of the novel; “La promessa”,<sup>10</sup> which covers the personal development of Mahlet, and “Il ritorno”,<sup>11</sup> which explores her public role as a returnee to the land of her birth and the subsequent collecting of the tales, the narrative voices tell the experience of a nation through the historical instances of political change and political uncertainty. Between the two parts of the book, taking up the last three pages of the first section, “La promessa”, is recorded the death of Yacob, the emblematic moment of change in Mahlet’s narrative journey (“Il vecchio Yacob si spense il 21 agosto, [... ], il giorno in cui in Etiopia si festeggia l’assunzione della Madonna al cielo”)<sup>12</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:117). In order to emotionally cope with this loss, Mahlet is forced to come to terms with her own role as cantor. No longer able to hide in the shadow of the old sage Yacob whose personal witnessing of events has formed the first link with the past, she must finally honour her promise to him and forge herself as narrator, the second step in the process of remembrance. In the words of Mahlet’s mother, who recognises the link between Yacob and her daughter, the history of the nation finds an echo in her person:

Aveva un grande affetto per te. Diceva che avevi avuto  
un dono da Dio: sentivi il legame con il passato. Gli

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<sup>10</sup> “The Promise”

<sup>11</sup> “The Return”

<sup>12</sup> “The old man Yacob died on the 21 August, the day on which Ethiopia celebrates the ascension of Mary to heaven.”

occhi dei grandi Santi, condottieri e guerrieri d’Etiopia  
risuonavano in te.<sup>13</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:119)

A chain of entwined stories filters through the cantor Mahlet, whose ultimate role is that of giving rebirth to the narrative and through it to re-evaluate the relationship between the old country of Mahlet’s and Ghermandi’s birth (Ethiopia) and the new country of her – the author’s – adopted home (Italy). The fact that in the original colonial relationships the two countries were reversed, the ‘old’ – Italy – being the homeland of the colonizer and the ‘new’ land, Ethiopia – being the land of the colonial enterprise – lends a fusion to the images that adds many differing layers to the discourse. There is the clash between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ with a series of shifting identifications within the story itself; the ‘old’ Ethiopia – land of the legend of the Queen of Sheba and repository of the mythical ark<sup>14</sup> – is also the ‘new’ land of the political game of empire; while the ‘new’ expansionist strength of Fascist Italy is also the aggressive regime that emulates the ‘old’ colonial wars of Roman propaganda in a ‘new’ mould; the victims from the Ethiopian side become the ‘new’ voice of the story teller that seeks to find resolution in a ‘new’ story of reconciliation grown out of the communal memory of past abuse; while the ‘new’ Italy, that, for many reasons, has done its best to forget the barbaric events of its colonial aspirations, must now not be allowed to forget its own ‘old’ iniquities.

At first a reluctant cantor, during her years of growth into adulthood Mahlet wilfully and perversely forgets the promise made to her uncle:

In quel periodo la storia del vecchio Yacob, assieme alla  
promessa solenne, scomparve dale mie orecchie e dal

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<sup>13</sup> He had great affection for you. He said that you had been given a gift by God: that you felt a link with the past. The eyes of the great Saints, the *condottieri* and warriors of Ethiopia reverberated within you.

<sup>14</sup> “Tu vieni dal paese della regina di Saba. Siete i discendenti di Re Salomone.” (Ghermandi, 2007:221) (“You come from the land of the Queen of Sheba. You are the descendants of King Solomon.”)

mio presente. E se della sua storia rimase solo una vaga presenza, mantenuta in vita dalle chiacchiere serali dei miei zii e dei miei genitori, della promessa non rimase alcun ricordo. Qualcosa di me l'aveva schiacciata in un angolo della stanza della memoria. Ben nascosta. In un baule invisibile e introvabile, sepolto sotto una catasta di cianfrusaglie.<sup>15</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:61)

The 'invisible trunk' that hides her buried memory recalls Yacob's trunk that holds the letter of submission, key to unlocking the memorial process. Her wilful attempts at the negation of this memory emblemize a withdrawal from the necessity of confronting this past. Her personal identity, entwined with her identity of writer and cantor, must be defined in the shadow of the story of her people and in a slow building of consciousness tied to the tales of her land. The process, however, is slow. Mahlet's attempts at negation of the promise become more willed and desperate as she fights off the sense of fear and confusion at the insistent voices that want to tell her their stories and find her in spite of herself:

Ero frastornata. Guerrieri, cavalli in corsa, truppe accampate nelle piane, gruppi di soldati in rapido movimento dietro costoni di roccia, leoni, scimmie, il Signor Antonio [...] Le storie ascoltate in quei cinque giorni si annodavano, accavalcavano, mescolavano come l'acqua sulla cresta dell'onda, si sbattevano qua e là togliendomi stabilità. La mente satura di immagini, ne eruttava di continuo, sconnesse tra loro, che si sbiadivano, rimescolavano e riemergevano di colpo.

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<sup>15</sup> In those years the story of the old man Yacob, together with my solemn promise, disappeared from my ears and from my present. And if his story remained it was only as a vague memory, kept alive only by the evening chats of my parents and my uncles, of my promise no memory remained. Some part of me had squashed it in a corner of the memory chamber. Well hidden. In an invisible trunk, impossible to find, buried under a mountain of debris.

Nitide e tangibili. “Woi gud!” – esclamai a bassa voce. –  
“Sto impazzendo”.<sup>16</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:233)

Amongst the paraphernalia of the clichéd adventure story of Empire – camped troops, horses, soldiers, exotic locations and animals – the story encroaches on Mahlet’s consciousness, goading her into the narrative necessity that is at the centre of her identity. Mahlet’s internal chaos, made up of voices jostling to find their place in her consciousness, is reflected in the external chaos of the crowded market place, the arena in which people meet for exchanges of all sorts – buying, selling, meeting, gossiping and storytelling:

Mentre raggiungevo a piedi la rotunda, osservando il caos intenso e il rumore, pensai che non vi era esteriorità più degna di rispecchiare il mio tramestio interiore. Il dolore e la confusione per la morte del mio vecchio avevano creato un brusio interiore. Come una folla di chiacchiere.<sup>17</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:124)

The moment of truth, however, can only be brought forth with the death of her uncle Yacob, who holds the key to her memory and through it, to the role she is destined to play in the community. His death – and the legacy that he leaves her in the form of a faded book containing a list of battles – opens the way for Mahlet to remember her promise and to begin the process of writing.

Qualcosa dentro di me si squarciò. Conoscevo quel quaderno, lo agguantai con mano tremante. “Il quaderno

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<sup>16</sup> I was confused. Warriors, galloping horses, troops camped on the plains, groups of soldiers in rapid movement behind rocky ridges, lions, monkeys, Signor Antonio [...] The stories I had heard in those five days were interwoven, straddled each other, melded like water on the crest of a wave, crashed here and there taking away my balance. My mind, saturated with unconnected images, erupted continuously with scenes that faded, re-formed and re-emerged suddenly. Neat and tangible. “Woi gud!” – I exclaimed softly. – “I am going mad”.

<sup>17</sup> As I reached the rotunda on foot, observing the intense chaos and noise, I thought that there could be no better external reality that could mirror my internal confusion. The pain and the confusion created by the death of my old man had created an internal buzzing. Just like a crowd of voices.

delle battaglie” – dissi con un filo di voce. – “Me ne ero scordata”. Accarezzai la copertina lentamente, fino al bordo inferior, poi aprii il quaderno. Dentro una scrittura minuta riportava dei nomi: Tecazze, Demaquina, Enda Selassié, Tempbien [...] Mi misi a piangere. Un pianto liberatorio. “La promessa. L’avevo dimenticata. Ecco cosa devo fare. Mantenere la mia promessa”. Sulla faccia ieratica di Abba Chereka apparve per un istante, un brevissimo istante il segno vago di un sorriso.<sup>18</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:124)

The circularity of the tale completes the magic circle of memory in which is both the beginning and the end, just as the novel starts with the promise and ends with the fulfilment of the promise.

The promise of becoming the cantor must also be remembered, just as importantly, by the reader/listener, who has also witnessed the making of the promise in the early stages of the story and who also needs constant reminding during the course of the novel. Along with the exclamation uttered by Mahlet’s father, the reader also experiences the catharsis of the fateful moment. (“Devo scrivere”, risposi. Non mi lasciò aggiungere altro. “Sellas! Sellas! Corri! – si mise a urlare. – Vieni a vedere. Si è ricordata! Si è ricordata” (Ghermandi, 2007:245). The reader is the intended recipient of this revelation as well as being a metaphorization of all the ‘Taliani’, the nation whose presence is at the centre of the unfolding of the remembered events. The reader, identified also with the live audience, receives the stories transmitted through the retold moments of history in the tradition of the oral tale; the teller will relay stories that have been remembered and then gathered in a process of historical (re)collection (both in the sense of recalling as well as of bringing together) while infusing this flow with narrative continuity. The past

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<sup>18</sup> Something ripped within me. I knew that exercise book. I gripped it with trembling hands. “The exercise book of the battles” – I said falteringly. – “I had forgotten.” I stroked the cover gently, right to the bottom edge, then I opened it. Inside, a small hand reported some names: Tecazze, Demaquina, Enda Selassié, Tempbien [...] I started crying. Liberating tears. “The promise. I had forgotten it. That is what I must do. I must keep my promise.” A vague sign of a smile appeared for an instant, a very brief instant, on the hieratic face of Abba Chereka.

is thereby integrated and hinged in a collective reliving with the present and, by implication, also with the future in the same way that Mahlet's multiple meaning give the character a duality of scope. Her emblematic name interpreted as both 'meaning' and 'that time' assures that Mahlet becomes the embodiment of the knowledge derived from the remembered tale:

Figliola, il tuo nome è quasi un gene.<sup>19</sup> Se togli l'acca e cambi un po' l'accento, Malet sta per "significato" e Ma'let sta per "quella volta", dunque "il significato di quella volta."<sup>20</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:126)

The reality of the remembered past or 'that time' can only be preserved through her collecting and passing on the stories that gave historical meaning to 'that time'. Her own memorial process, during which she had inadvertently and by default collected the stories of her countrymen and women, finally finds expression and meaning through the rosary of tales that empower the formerly weak ("[...] per dire la nostra, e perché nessuno in Italia possa parlare solo a modo suo, durante questo tuo ultimo anno a Bologna potresti usare le storie che ti si sono state raccontate a Giorgis.")<sup>21</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:199). The flowering – hence the title of the novel – of the isolated, and often forgotten, individual narrative voice, ultimately becoming the voice of the cantor, will outlast the experience of the individual and become the collective memory of the narrated events. In the words of Vieda Skultans "[...] stories exert a claim or a call upon our moral imagination and compel us to listen" (Skultans, 2006:6). Thus, the stories of Ghermandi's book surpass the narrative pleasure of re-

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<sup>19</sup> "Figura retorica che consiste nel dire una cosa implicandone un'altra allo stesso tempo e nella stessa frase" (Ghermandi:2007:126). (A rhetorical figure that consists in saying one thing while implying another at the same time or in the same phrase).

<sup>20</sup> Child, your name is almost a gene. If you take away the H and change the accent slightly, Mahlet stands for 'meaning' and Ma'let stands for the word 'that'.

<sup>21</sup> "[...] just to have a say, and so that no one in Italy will be able to speak in their own way, during this last year of yours in Bologna you could use the stories that you have been told at Giorgis."

telling tales of valour by becoming the witnessing of events spanning generations. From the memories of Yacob's life to the readers of the book, the unbroken line of narrative memory continues along its predetermined path. That is why, on her request to Yacob to support her wish to study in Italy, the family sages give her their blessing. ("The old man Yacob called the old man Yohannes and the old man Selemon in order to tell them the facts and to consult their opinion. After a few minutes I heard them blessing God for having put me on the road that they desired"<sup>22</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:113). As both character and writer Mahlet/Ghermandi must fulfil the narrative necessity that defines them both.

The complexity of the Russian doll structure of this book is thus both its essence and its message. Having chosen the narrative form for the retelling of the steps of this historical process, Ghermandi mediates tales of personal suffering, both her own pain as well as the shared pain of her people embedded within the historical narrative. Iain Chambers, quoting Rustom Bharucha, says: "In the aseptic and sterilized accounts of history, sociology, anthropology, the 'pain of violence' is written out of the narrative and forgotten" (Chambers, 1996:48). By welding together the personal and intimate with the broader historical processes of nations, Ghermandi manages to tell the history of the Italian colonial war of aggression without leaving out this 'pain of violence'. The narrative voices of *Regina di fiori e di perle* become an outright challenge to the "imperial pasts, which to the mind of many in the present, are best remembered only through the mists of nostalgia" (Hall, 1996:66). The narratives describe the pain of each individual whose fate is to become part of a re-evaluation of an historical moment that had been allowed to fall into oblivion for so many years. The universal understanding of selfhood is the same as the process of "[...] becoming self through becoming the other" (Cooppan, 2000:23). Thus the book collates stories in order to understand them and to pass them on as a tool for understanding the world. In the final words of the novel: "Ed è per questo che oggi vi

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<sup>22</sup> "Il vecchio Yacob chiamò il vecchio Yohanes e il vecchio Selemon per raccontare loro i fatti e ascoltarne il parere. Dopo qualche minuto sentì che benedicevano Dio per avermi messo sulla strada che loro auspicavano."

racconto la sua storia. Che poi è anche la mia. Ma pure la vostra”<sup>23</sup> (Ghermandi: 2007:251).

Central to this process of re-evaluation is, of course, the choice of language in which the author writes her account. Italian, the language of the colonizer, is used as the language of communication of her book, aimed as it is, by virtue of the promise made to Yacob, to take “[...] our stories to the land of the Italians”<sup>24</sup> (Ghermandi, 2007:6). Yet, the issue is not as simple as that. By virtue of Ghermandi’s own biographical reality, Italian is also part of her *de facto* identity – her own “linguaggio familiar”<sup>25</sup> (Comberiati, 2010:166) – which, along with the Amharic of her mother, defines her both as writer and as individual. Much like the character Mahlet, whose heritage is also Ethiopian and Italian, the author’s identity is on the cusp of two cultures. By writing in Italian – the language of the oppressor but also of her paternal heritage – Ghermandi chooses a language that is both her own as well as that spoken by the intended audience to whom she wishes to impart the communal understanding of the historical memory. The book thus utilizes language not merely as a means of communication but as a social and psychological marker for the definition of the relationship that is at the centre of the interplay between the colonizer and the colonized. Interspersing Amharic script in the fictional form of letters written home within one of the stories, as well as in descriptive phrases that recapture a spirit of place, alongside the Italian used for the rest of the narrative, Ghermandi lays bare the multifaceted nature of the colonial experience. In a language that is “corrosa dall’interno”<sup>26</sup> (Comberiati, 2010:174), Ghermandi writes with no apology by way of translation, and very little by way of glossary to help the bridging of the two, only the co-existence of the recounted stories and the flow of the communal voice in what has

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<sup>23</sup> And it is for this very reason that today I tell you his story. Which is also mine. But yours as well.

<sup>24</sup> “Le nostre storie nella terra degli italiani.”

<sup>25</sup> “Familial language.”

<sup>26</sup> “Corroded from within.”

been called the “organic vision” typical of the oral African tradition (Tapping:1990:81).

Ghermandi draws her influences from a rich literary tradition where the nature of storytelling is understood as a dramatic event that is more important than the individual work itself. The voices of her accumulated stories are the voices of a community that represents, in dramatic form, the presence of what otherwise can be seen purely as the ‘Other’. Describing his own formation as writer, the Nigerian Uzodinma Iweala says: “[...] I am the fruit of ancient traditions, of all the oral stories that people have told for millennia, of the themes that have repeated themselves in all cultures of the world [...]”<sup>27</sup> (Vivan, 2007:286). Gabriella Ghermandi walks in the same footsteps.

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<sup>27</sup> “[...] io son il frutto di tradizioni antichissime, di tutte le storie orali che la gente ha raccontato per millenni, dei temi che si sono ripetuti in tutte le culture del mondo [...]”

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