

**FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES: THE CULTURAL
COLLISION EXPERIENCED BY THE AFRICAN
PROTAGONISTS IN THE SHORT STORIES
“MAL DI ...” AND “VADO A CASA”
BY KOSSI KOMLA-EBRI**

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Sommario

L'articolo propone un'analisi di alcuni personaggi-chiave della narrativa dello scrittore togolese Kossi Komla-Ebri nascenti dal bagaglio personale dell'autore, soffermandosi in particolare sul problema dell'identità dei migranti africani spinti verso nuove vite in Europa e delle loro difficoltà a causa di un'integrazione che nega la terra di provenienza. Lo studio si sofferma anche sulla tematica dell'italianità e pone la domanda "Che cosa significa essere italiani"? o più importante "Che cosa si deve fare per divenire italiani?".

In 2008, Giorgio Napolitano, the president of Italy, at the annual ceremony held in Rome for new Italian citizens, highlighted the 'grande problema dell'accoglimento dell'altro' and observed that it is imperative for Italians to adopt a more open-minded and benevolent approach to migrants. In his speech he stressed that an essential part of intercultural and interaction is the realization that contact with someone from another country does not impoverish one's own identity but if anything can strengthen it. Contact with the other is one of the many factors that allows one to define and enrich one's own identity, to allow this 'devon cader i vecchi pregiudizi'.¹

It is these very prejudices that Kossi Komla-Ebri seeks to expose, albeit with humour and light-heartedness, in some of his short stories

¹ Telegiornale RAI (RAI International 13/11/2008).

in *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*² as well as in his collection of anecdotes *Imbarazzismi*.³ Born in the former French and German colony of Togo, Komla-Ebri, the first male in a family of twelve siblings, was sent, thanks to a bursary, at a very young age to complete his schooling in France. In Paris, notwithstanding his French citizenship, the author endured tremendous hardship, discrimination and poverty which not only prevented him from pursuing his dream of becoming a medical doctor but, by his own admission, were decisive factors in influencing his choice of Italian in his narrative.⁴ In 1974, at the age of 20, he moved to Italy where he completed his medical studies in Bologna and in 1982 he moved with his wife – a native Italian – and their two children to Como. Today he practices medicine at the Ospedale Fatebenefratelli in Erba. Politically and socially active on issues affecting migrants, in 2002 Komla-Ebri became the first African-Italian to run for Parliament⁵ and is currently co-editor of *El Ghibli*.⁶ His own prolific literary production spans multiple genres, he has written lyric poetry, journal articles and fiction, and he has also won several literary awards for his short stories, now collected in a volume and published with the title.

As a migrant and as a writer, Komla-Ebri has the privilege of a double perspective as he is both an insider and an outsider. Consequently, his ability to promote awareness of diverse cultures within one rooted culture is a product of a lived reality and is, therefore, an ongoing process. As a result, the phenomena of

² Collection of short stories published in 2003.

³ A collection of daily encounters and incidents between Italians and Africans that highlight prejudices brought about by cultural differences.

⁴ In an e-mail sent to me on 28/11/2007, in answer to my question “Perché hai scelto l’italiano e non il francese che in fondo è una lingua con la quale ti trovi più a tuo agio?” Komla-Ebri said: “Ho scelto di scrivere in questa lingua perché è una lingua che amo , per il suo suono, ritmo e melodia. La lingua italiana è gonfia di immaginario e non ho rancori nei suoi confronti come potrei averlo anche inconsciamente con quella francese che è rimane la lingua dei colonizzatori che volevano civilizzare fino al midollo.”

⁵ Ulivo coalition of the centre-left.

⁶ Online journal dedicated to higher diffusion of literature by migrant writers in Italy.

fragmented identities and dual identity is accurately portrayed in Komla-Ebri's migrant protagonists because it has both occurred and occurs in his own personality. His narrative is a clear manifestation of how cultural barriers not only lead to isolation and fragmented identities, but also how these very barriers govern and impoverish. The reader is constantly reminded how acculturation not only changes cultural behaviour, it actually divides and dislocates. For this reason, the protagonist, Yao, in "Vado a casa", is included in this analysis even though the story is based in France and not Italy. The adversities suffered by Yao as a result of his African migrant status are analogous to those suffered by most African migrants anywhere in Europe, including the author himself.

Both "Vado a casa" and "Mal di...", published for the first time online in *Eks&Tra*⁷ in 1997 and now both included in the collection, illustrate with insight the struggle migrants are faced with daily as a result of prejudices and attitudes towards what Komla-Ebri calls 'i diversamente visibili'.⁸ Victims of marginalization, dislocation and acculturation, all three characters (Yao in "Vado a casa" and Fofu and Fofu's sister in "Mal di...") face an ongoing battle in the host country in order to fit in. Both stories also touch briefly on the return home and the looming identity crisis associated with the return, a theme Komla Ebri explores in depth and with great sensitivity in the novel *Neyla*.⁹

Yao is lured to Europe by the promise of a better life in Paris and Fofu's sister by the life her brother, a doctor, appears to lead in Italy. Both characters soon come face to face with the harsh realization that respect and tolerance for diverse cultures are not seen as a fundamental rights and that Euro-centrism is still very much prevalent. As a young girl from a remote village in Africa, Fofu's

⁷ Italian literary online journal and competition open exclusively to migrant writers.

⁸ Cited in an interview with Silvia Turrin in 2011 entitled "Intervista a Kossi Komla-Ebri", <http://www.culture-nature-magazine.info>.

⁹ The novel recounts the love story between the heroine, Neyla, and Yawo, who returns home to Africa from Europe on holiday. It analyses the fundamental difficulty experienced by the main protagonist as a result of an identity split brought about by two vastly different cultures, one African and the other European, and the concept of 'otherness' common to all those who leave and then return.

sister's eagerness to join her brother and lend a hand with his children is not surprising, as many Africans have an unrealistic image of Europe in their minds. The perception conveyed by the local media that Europe is a type of heaven on earth is further encouraged by westerners who holiday lavishly in Africa. Moreover, migrants, generally ashamed of their newly acquired hardships and poverty, seldom disclose the difficulties and struggles encountered in the host country. Consequently, Komla-Ebri's portrayal of the young protagonist's overwhelming sense of joy at the prospect of living in Italy and meeting her newly acquired family is entirely justified:

L'Italia! [...] allora solo a pensarci era come sfiorare il cielo con un dito. Erano anni che Fofo mio fratello mi prometteva di portarmi con se in Europa. Non so descrivere l'immensità della mia gioia quando arrivò la tanta attesa lettera [...]. (2003:9)

However, her encounter with Italy is nothing like she imagined and right from the onset she is overwhelmed by cultural traditions that are markedly disconnected from her own way of life. Bewildered by her new condition, she fails initially to recognize the indifference and unconcealed disregard manifested by her newly acquired family and attempts to seek refuge and comfort in the familiarity of mementoes that remind her of her home – “me ne stavo sempre di più rinchiusa nella mia stanza a cullarmi nella nostalgia” (Komla-Ebri, 2003:11).¹⁰

Yao, on the other hand, in his determined quest to return home, is a pathetic and forlorn figure. In his hand-me-down clothes, empty belly and petty criminal activities, he is not only emblematic of the migrants who walk the streets of Europe, but in many ways is the spokesperson for Komla-Ebri who as a struggling student was subjected to similar

¹⁰ In an interview with Achille Rossi in 2006 entitled “Troppi pregiudizi” (<http://www.altrapagina.it/ingrandimento-articolo.php>), Komla-Ebri stated that the migrants' first reaction upon arrival is that of fear which pushes them to seek out familiar smells, memories and people.

humiliating episodes.¹¹ This is further illustrated by Tahar Ben Jelloun¹² in *Le pareti della solitudine*¹³ where the experience of the host countries at large has shown that migrants in general are seen as an economic and cultural burden:

Coloro che non hanno altra ricchezza che la loro differenza etnica e culturale sono votati all'umiliazione e ad ogni forma di razzismo. Danno anche fastidio. La loro presenza è di troppo. Il viaggio per loro, non sarà mai di villaggiatura. Per loro il viaggio è la valigia legata con uno spago, pacchetti di roba da mangiare e un pugno di terra o di menta del paese, nel fazzoletto. Con la terra si cospargono il viso quando tutto va male e la nostalgia diventa il solo rifugio, l'unica consolazione. L'immigrato è un'aberrazione dei tempi moderni. È un errore della nostra epoca. Una sbavatura della storia. Non ha altro da vendere che la sua forza e i suoi modi maldestri, spaesati, quelli di uno che ha l'aria di scusarsi in continuazione. (Ramberti & Sangiorgi, 1999:VIII)

If Ben Jelloun's description of the migrant offers little hope for any form of integration or acceptance by the host country so too do the actions of Fofó's wife and children. Viewed with suspicion by her sister-in-law because "per educazione non la guardavo negli occhi quando le parlavo", and mocked by her nephews who ape "il mio parlare africano con Abuga, bongo bongo" (Komla-Ebri, 2002:11), these Euro-centric attitudes not only disconnect Fofó's sister even more, but also reveal a disconcerting perception about Italian society

¹¹ In an interview with Pedro Pedroni *Interviste e riflessioni* 26 June 1999 (www.kossikomlaebri.net), the author recounts personal episodes that are a constant reminder of what African migrants are forced to confront on a daily basis in the host country.

¹² Tahar Ben Jelloun is a Moroccan poet and writer who has lived in France since 1974. His works have received many awards including the *Prix Goncourt* and the *International Impazc Dublin Award*. He is also an active participant in the various seminars and conferences held regarding migrant literature in Italy.

¹³ Published in 1997 in French with the title *La Reclusion Solitaire*, it tells the story of a North African immigrant and serves to denounce the racist behaviour that has gripped Europe.

in general. In research carried out by Paola Tabet at the University of Calabria on obsession and fear of the other, a cross-section of children throughout Italy was interviewed. One of the questions “Che cosa farei se i miei genitori fossero neri?” collected answers ranging from “li terrei come schiavi” to “avrei paura per sempre” to “proverei a dipingerli con un colore chiaro come rosa e almeno diventerebbero di pelle italiana” (Tabet, 1997:17). The sentiments expressed not only reflect a lack of social awareness of other cultures and practices, but also signal how a series of stereotypes and racial prejudices are encouraged at an early age.

Similarly, it is Yao’s ‘otherness’ that draws statements like “Fannullone di un negro, vai a lavorare, o meglio, perché non te ne torni a casa tua?” (Komla-Ebri, 2003:24), hurling him further down the path of humiliation and degradation as is evident from the following passage:

A Parigi aveva provato di tutto: dal dormire in dieci in una stanza gelida, dandosi il cambio fra il duro tappeto e il divano sgangherato, dove in cinque si stava seduti con i piedi appoggiati sulle sedie, stringendosi per ripararsi dal vento del nord che filtrava dagli infissi e pungeva fin dentro le ossa, [...] Solo a ripensarci gli veniva la pelle d’oca. Gli sembrava di sentirsi ancora addosso quella puzza mista di rancido, di muffa e di odore di spezie che immancabilmente si portava addosso, nonostante le frequenti abluzioni nelle docce pubbliche. Sì, signori, se ne andava a casa: non avrebbe più, mai più frugato nei cassonetti la sera, dietro ai supermercati, per sfamarsi e tanto meno si sarebbe abbassato nel métro facendo finta di allacciarsi le scarpe per raccattare cicche. (2003:22)

Both characters’ inability to integrate to a culture poles apart from their own, results in them being marginalized almost immediately and in Fofo’s sister’s case, her attempt to hold onto her identity, which is her only tool for survival, is prevented by her own relative. Fofo, her brother, refuses to assist her in overcoming these social cultural

barriers, preferring to reel off what she is not to do while she is a 'guest' in the home that he shares with his white wife:

Subito mi raccomandò di tenere la mia stanza in ordine, di usare le pattine quando entravo in salotto, di non farmi la doccia tutti i giorni perchè il riscaldamento costa, di non lasciare le luci accese nelle scale e in bagno, di non impiegare tre ore per stirare, di non parlare nella nostra lingua e di tenere basso il volume di quella "nenia" di musica Africana. Incluso nel sacrosanto decalogo, vi era il divieto di cucinare cibi che richiedevano troppo tempo di cottura, e che soprattutto impregnavano la casa per giorni con la scia dei condimenti cioè la puzza. (2003:10)

In this seemingly insignificant and amusing incident, Komla-Ebri illustrates the need for migrants to create a new identity in order to be accepted in the host country. The list of 'do not's' is in fact suggestive of a new identity that the brother Fofo is creating for himself in order to fit the Italian profile. To facilitate his acceptance in the host country, he has had to "Italianize" himself as much as possible, adopting western attire and attitudes which have enabled him to fit in easier and adhere to the norm. For this reason he is constantly on the look-out for any blunders on his sister's part which would embarrass him in his new identity. It is in keeping his distance from the African in her that he can safeguard his assimilation to western culture. Molefi Kete Assante,¹⁴ in his paper "*Afro-Germans and the Problems of Cultural Location*", states that marginalization brings with it not only the dilemma of social dislocation, which in most cases is influenced by skin colour, but also the problem of cultural and historical dislocation. Cultural dislocation can occur when people live their lives on someone else's terms rather than their own. Coupled with historical dislocation, a phenomenon that forces people to live outside of the influence of their own intellectual traditions, cultural dislocation further serves to divide and fragment the already fragile identity of the migrant. Fofo in "Mal di..." is a prime example. Not

¹⁴ Molefi Kete Assante, 2006, *Afro-Germans and the Problems of Cultural Location* (<http://www.assante.net/scholarly/afrogermans.html>).

only is he a victim of this type of dislocation, but he is now also guilty of perpetrating it with his own sister.

What are some of the reasons that hinder positive interaction between different ethnic groups in Italy and in most countries in Europe? Komla-Ebri's view is that mis-representation and often under-representation of Africa and its diverse cultures by the European media at large can result in a negative perception of certain African countries. Footages portraying children with swollen bellies, famine, corrupt governments and uneducated, uncivilized people are the order of the day.¹⁵ Few Italians even know who Shaka Zulu, Amilcar Cabral and Patrice Lumumba were.¹⁶ Few have seen or will see films by directors such as Sembene Ousmane from Senegal, Idrissa Ouedraogo from Burkina Faso or Cheik Omar Sissoko from Mali. Added to this is the negative stereotypical perception of otherness often relayed by the media, as well as the noticeable exclusion of other ethnic cultures on Italian television.¹⁷ It remains debatable whether the influx of European and African migrants into the peninsula has led to a greater level of criminality, yet daily media reports of rapes and thefts tend to point fingers at the *clandestine*.¹⁸ This has resulted in a general air of mistrust that has had a negative impact on all aspects of migrant society and culture. Consequently, when Yao approaches an elderly lady for help it is not surprising that

¹⁵ These views were expressed by the author in the article *Decostruire l'immaginario*.

¹⁶ Founder and king of the Zulu nation; Engineer, writer and nationalist politician who led Guinea-Bissau's independence movement; African anti-colonial leader and first legally elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo.

¹⁷ My own experience in observing RAI International is that talk shows like "*La vita in diretta*", which takes up a good part of every week day, seldom, if ever, has Africans amongst the audience let alone African guests on the show. Even more controversial shows like *Che tempo che fa*, *Anno Zero* and *Ballarò* are not representative of all ethnic groups and cultures in Italy.

¹⁸ A study, carried out by Caritas and Migrantes in 2009 entitled *La criminalità degli immigrati: dati, interpretazioni e pregiudizi*, shows that there is no correlation between the increase of migrants and the increase of crime and there is a tendency by the media to emphasize crime by migrants more than home-grown crime (<http://www.toscanaoggi.it/Toscana/Gli-immigrati-aumentano-la-criminalità>).

“quest’ultima fece un vistoso scarto di paura, con un gridolino acuto, stringendosi la borsetta al petto”, or that when he tries to stop a young girl she, “subordando o fraintendendo le sue intenzioni, attraversò con passi affrettati la strada, per raggiungere l’altro marciapiede” (Komla-Ebri, 2003:24). However, according to Komla-Ebri it is in trivializing this type of body language that we create “un terreno fertile al virus del razzismo che dalla naturale diffidenza al confronto del “diverso da sé cresce in intolleranza per sbocciare in vero razzismo”.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the Italian government’s stand against racism and xenophobia, anti-racist protest rallies in Italy²⁰ indicate that this same stand has yet to be successfully implemented on the streets, and as is obvious with both Fofu’s sister and Yao, a person is judged not on what he or she does, but rather on what he or she appears to be, and in most case the colour of one’s skin is the deciding factor. It is when Africa is perceived as the ‘other’ and, as a consequence, different to Europe (in this case Italy and France), that a spectrum of attitudes ranging from paternalism (“Mal di...”) to downright racism (“Vado a casa”) is generated.

Further hindering interaction could be the fact that Italy does not have the same colonial past as England and France, and, as such, may be struggling to consider itself a state built on a multiplicity of identities. According to Renzo Guolo, a sociologist and Islamist at the University of Padua, Italians still do not conceive of migrants as people who in the future will remain and live in Italy and as a result interaction and integration with multi-ethnic African cultures is restricted and inclined to be somewhat one sided. He observed that quite simply, Italians do not know how to build a society made up of different ethnic groups.²¹ This apparent lack of tolerance is further underlined by Graziella Parati who states that the catholic hierarchy in Italy has “a fascination with sameness” which “aims to prove that

¹⁹ Komla-Ebri expressed this view in an interview with Agnese Bertello in 2002 titled *La banalità del razzismo* (<http://www.kossikomleebri.net/intervista/a/bertello-casa-della-cultura.php>).

²⁰ See www.presstv.ir/detail/221138.html.

²¹ Guolo was cited in an article by Elizabeth Rosenthal in 2006 entitled “A casa in Italia ma non ancora emarginati”. *Ediburg* (<http://www.eddyburg.it/articleview/5503/0/218>).

migrants are “breaking and entering” a culturally unified country that needs to defend the rights of the majority from cultural contamination” (2005:24). It is not surprising then that the general public at large rather than interacting with these various multi-ethnic groups, tends to marginalize them until such time as they have been ‘Italianized’ as much as possible, but even that is no guarantee of assimilation. However, as is evident in the passage that follows, even countries like France who have been sensitized and accustomed to multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural communities for a longer period than Italy still appear to harbour strong prejudices towards *i visibilmente diversi* in general:

Su per le scale, egli pensava ad Annie e alle sue compagne per cui provava una grande stima. Conversando molte volte con le ragazze, aveva scoperto quanto potevano essere leali e solidali fra di loro e con la gente che, come lui, vive di espedienti nei destini tortuosi, nelle vie buie della rude e avara città “Lumière”. Ormai, per l’opinione generale e per i mass media, i drogati, le prostitute, i gay, i delinquenti, gli immigrati e a volte anche gli handicappati formano un unico gregge, nello stesso recinto, ai confini del perbenismo e della legalità più ipocrita. (Komla-Ebri, 2003:20)

Yao, Fofu’s sister and Fofu are all examples of how one’s identity is defined by others’ perception of it and how by virtue of the colour of their skin they are at the mercy of xenophobic and racist behaviour. Moreover, their social standing in society is also indicative of the type of treatment they will receive. Komla-Ebri pointed out that

si è stranamente più paternalisti nei confronti di un venditore ambulante che verso un cantante, un calciatore, un’indossatrice famosa o un medico. Ho potuto notare che il mio camice bianco è uno scudo protettore: in qualche modo mi rende più [...] bianco.²²

²² Cited from an interview with Bertello. The same view is corroborated by Giuseppina Commare who observed that “xenophobic and judgmental attitudes with regard to the other

There is no doubt that Yao's need to return home is inextricably linked to the fact that, like Fofu's sister in "Mal di...", he does not fit the identity nor the social profile called for by the French.

So how does one get to be Italian, or for that matter French? Is it sufficient to be born in the 'host' country? Does citizenship or knowledge of the language guarantee assimilation? Assante suggests that in the German mind, to be African and to be German, is not to be German. In applying this same concept to Italians, perhaps the question should not be whether this principle is applied specifically to migrants born in Italy but rather, whether it applies exclusively to black Africans born in Italy or to those people born in the peninsula but who do not fit the identity profile of what an Italian is perceived to be. In a recent interview Komla-Ebri maintained that "in this country we are always judged by our appearances. [...] It is we, the 'differently visible' who are being targeted. Because, in a few years, the others dissolve into Italian culture as the Greeks and Albanians have done, and the Romanians will, too. But we Africans will always be visibly different, so we have to set out different means of integration so that it is not always based on appearances".²³

Significantly, in an interview with Fabio Fazio,²⁴ Nadine Gordimer stated that in South Africa to be considered 'African' one has to earn the right. Birth does not automatically qualify one as being 'African' and in order to earn the right, one has to have taken part in the struggle in some way. In post-apartheid this applies specifically to whites. Consequently, white South Africans' claim to *africanità*, notwithstanding their birthright, is challenged continuously in the new

are generally overlooked in situations where members of a minority ethnic group enjoy the same social status as the host group or actually have a higher social status, ambassadors, doctors, journalists, etc. Ultimately, the deciding factor in accepting otherness is the realization that one can actually "imparare da coloro cui si vorrebbe solo insegnare" (Commare, 2006:111).

²³ Maëva Kokodoko, 2011, "Italy and the New Italians: an Interview with Migrant Writer Kossi Komla-Ebri Maëva Kokodoko" (<http://www.euroalter.com/2011/italy-and-the-new-italians-an-interview-with-migrant-writer-kossi-komla-ebri/>).

²⁴ Gordimer was interviewed by Fabio Fazio in April 2008 on the programme "Che tempo che fa?" RAI 3.

South Africa. In the same way, Komla-Ebri's *italianità*, notwithstanding his Italian citizenship and his years of permanence in Italy, is equally challenged primarily because as a black man he does not fit the Italian profile. Similarly, many of Komla-Ebri's characters are constantly forced to question their identities in their host countries and others still like Yawo in *Neyla* and Fofó's sister in "Mal di..." find themselves doing so again upon returning home.

Lonely and finding comfort only within the confines of her room, Fofó's sister (the very fact that she remains nameless is also indicative of her lack of identity) eventually musters up the courage to leave her brother's house and, with the help of another migrant, finds a place of her own. It is this new found friend who, in teaching her the language and the customs, a role Fofó should have taken on, not only acts as a bridge between African and Italian culture, but assists her in coming to terms with her fragmented identities. Migrant writers at a conference held in Siena in February 2006, agreed that the most enriching phase in the migrants' internal journey should not be the need for integration but rather the need for *intercultural e interazione*. This is the stage whereby migrants no longer consider themselves aliens in the host country but are finally comfortable with who they are and with their culture. They prove this by no longer denying their origins, and no longer emulating the identity of the ethnic group that hosted them. This is exactly what Fofó's sister does in "Mal di...". In leaving her brother's house she comes to terms with her 'lost' identity and re-embraces her culture without any form of shame or embarrassment:

E così ripresi a salutare gli africani che incontravo per strada. Alcuni venivano a trovarmi , perché avevo la fortuna di avere un appartamento solo per me [...] dove si poteva stare insieme per farci le trecce, ascoltare musica senza disturbare nessuno e parlare ad alta voce. (Komla-Ebri, 2003:13 -14)

Ironically, it is this very split from her brother and her new found independence that allows her to renew her relationship with Fofó. In visiting her at her own place he returns to his African traditions and

together they create a sort of cultural collusion, a hybrid space where the past and present are reconciled:

Mio fratello venne a trovarmi di nascosto dalla moglie. Lì da me ritrovavo il Fofo che avevo sempre conosciuto, parlavamo la nostra lingua, gli preparavo piatti nostri, piccanti, che inghiottiva golosamente [...] con le dita, poi spezzava l'osso con i denti e ne succhiava voluttuosamente il midollo, facendo un rumore infernale, e lo sentì infine, ridere come si usa da noi a piena gola. (Komla-Ebri, 2003:13)

At the *Forum Internazionale della Letteratura della Migrazione* held in Siena in February 2006, Saleh Methnani observed (as is evident with Fofo in “Mal di...”) that abnegation and denial of one’s native identity and culture is carried out by the migrant (perhaps even at a subconscious level), for the sole purpose of ensuring rapid integration and assimilation by the host country. However, both integration and assimilation by their very nature belittle the values and culture of the person being ‘integrated’ and ‘assimilated’, and therefore the processes in the long run will not benefit the migrant in the search for his/her identity. It is therefore not coincidental that Komla-Ebri’s character Fofo visits his sister secretly in order to indulge in some of his African practices. It suggests that a further phase linked to the migrant’s identity, *i.e.* the re-evaluation of one’s culture and acceptance of it, is still in the embryonic stage in him.

Fofo’s sister’s return to Africa after several years is dictated primarily by her perception of Italy and her Italian experience: “Questo paese, questa nebbia non fa per me, mi manca il sole, le feste al villaggio, il tempo, le risa della gente, il vivere insieme con le persone” (Komla-Ebri, 2003:15). Yao too, cannot wait to leave France: “Se ne andava da questo paese freddo non solo per il clima, ma freddo soprattutto per il rapporto con la gente” (Komla-Ebri, 2003:22). Read out of context, these words might lead one to believe the speaker is missing the sun and warmth of Italy and of its people. After all, such affirmations correspond to the nation’s stereotypical character, especially the southern part of Italy and match up to a

certain degree to the image Italians have of themselves. Ironically, the Italy Komla-Ebri describes is far from Shelley's paradise of exiles. From the start Fofu's sister's perception of Italy is that of a cold country and right from the beginning of her journey she is taken aback by the climate in Rome:

L'Italia! Dio, il freddo! Non immaginavo fosse così pungente. Le mie labbra si screpolarono, le dita si irrigidirono e la mia pelle prese quel color grigio delle lucertole, nonostante mi spalmassi di crema di cocco. (Komla-Ebri, 2003:10)

This view of coldness is then extended from a climatically cold country to a country with cold people, a country whose people are not open to intercultural dialogue. Her brother's wife treats her like an outsider, her nephews mock her inability to speak Italian but most of all her brother "era diventato come un bianco: freddo ed indifferente alla sua gente, come se si vergognasse delle sue origini" (Komla-Ebri, 2003:14). In westernizing himself, Fofu has taken on many habits and custom that are Italian. In the eyes of his sister he has lost those values of solidarity and collectivity that stereotype Africans and replaced them with "la riservatezza, la discrezione e la freddezza degli italiani." In "Vado a casa" the 'promised land' has so disappointed and eluded the main character that he now harbours strong feelings of hatred towards it:

Sì! Odiava Parigi, perché sapeva essere crudele ed esigente come l'amata che degna concedersi solo al suono delle monete [...]. Odiava di certo quella città cinica, che non ti permetteva neanche di urinare, se entravi senza un franco in un bar quando eri lontano dai famosi vespasiani (Komla-Ebri, 2002:19)

and he clings desperately to the dream of what returning home should be like. In a reversal of roles it is no longer the Paris of the *cartoline* and the *bistrot* and the *Tour Eiffel* (Komla-Ebri, 2003:19) that has the power to captivate him. Now it is Yao's hometown that becomes a

magical place where he can seek refuge and comfort even if only in his mind. His reformed image of home now occupies a special place in his heart where Yao can dream of eating “spiedini piccanti” and dancing until dawn with “vere ragazze africane, calde, con dei seni belli, sodi” (Komla-Ebri, 2003:22). In “Vado a casa”, Yao can revisit Abidjan at any time, be it in his dreams or in his mind and claim it as his own. Although this does not replace his longing and yearning for home, the magical quality with which the hometown is recreated in his memories prevents him from entertaining unpleasant and contradictory feelings towards it. Unlike Yawo in *Neyla* and Fofó's sister, he will never be forced to nosedive into his feelings and find himself in a no-man's land suspended between two opposing ways of life.

A week after her return to her native village Fofó's sister recognizes that she no longer has anything in common with her old friends and that her outlook on life has been radically altered. Time, physical distance and cultural shifts as a result of migration have created a gulf between home and the returnee which contribute to the protagonist feeling like an outsider in her own home. She too, like Yawo in *Neyla*, has a new awareness of her surroundings and her people which ultimately leads her to perceive herself as the 'other'. The realization that, as the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch observed – “One never returns – like the prodigal son and Ulysses, he who returns is already another”²⁵ – compels Fofó's sister to deal once again with the question of her identity. Caught in a vice grip between two countries, two cultures and two identities her unease amongst her people and with African rural life is such that she feels the need to move away and settle in the city. It is there, in an emerging modern Africa, that she attempts to reconcile herself with her new identity and, in recreating bits of Italy, in the form of music, cinema and food, absorbs parts of both cultures.

Komla-Ebri's experience and journey as a migrant have taken him into the very environments he describes. His narrative reveals a writer who has the skill to describe with insight the obstacles his characters face when shifting backwards and forward between diverse

²⁵ Cited by Filippo Rossi in 2003 in an article entitled “*Quando la nostalgia è postmoderna*” (<http://www.ideazione.com/settimanale/5.cultura/89.htm>).

cultures. He has mastered the ability not only of being the other but also of being the one who through fear and ignorance can condemn and judge the other. The inability to fit in because of one's otherness is explored in many of Komla-Ebri's short stories and suggests the need for a social awareness of a condition that is eating away at the heart of Italian society. However, Komla-Ebri's mission as a writer is not to denounce or to berate. His calling, by his own admission, is to act as a bridge between two diverse continents and a mediator between two diverse cultures. The use of humour in his narrative is one of the literary devices that according to Komla-Ebri can lessen the burden of the stereotypical image of the other. In "Mal di..." the cultural blunders of Fofu's sister and Yao (upon her arrival in Rome Fofu's sister slept on top of the sheets and consequently froze while Yao attempted to leave the country with his cousin's air ticket and passport) demonstrate Komla-Ebri's willingness to steer his characters into socially embarrassing situations in order to highlight cultural differences. According to the writer, irony and laughter are effective antidotes because "la risata accende la luce nel buio"²⁶ and by revealing cultural arrogance and ignorance, it can create cultural awareness. "Indeed [...] Komla-Ebri uses humour to show how well he understands Italian culture, but continually highlights his own – and all migrants' – exclusion from that culture" (Parati & Tamburi, 2011:186).

"Mal di..." ends with Fofu's sister's return to Africa where she embraces both cultures in an attempt to reconcile her fragmented identities. Yao, resigned to his miserable fate as a migrant, is determined to pick up the pieces of his life and go forward with the knowledge that he will survive "nonostante i muri di parole, di leggi, di frontiere e di pregiudizi che gli uomini continuano ad erigere fra di loro, per rendersi la vita impossibile" (Komla-Ebri, 2003:30).

But what of Fofu? Does he succeed in Italianizing himself sufficiently to be considered Italian? Or does he like Yawo in the novel *Neyla* still abnegate his very roots in order to immerse himself in this new situation? Is he still in "quella fitta nebbia fra il non più e il non ancora, sulla strada vischiosa ed incerta di un divenire"

²⁶ Cited by A. Bertello in 2002 in an article entitled *La banalità del razzismo* (<http://www.kossikomlaebri.net/intervista/a/bertello-casa-della-cultura.php>).

(Komla-Ebri, 2003:44)? And what of Fofó's wife and children? Do they overcome their paternalistic attitude and open themselves to intercultural dialogue or are they still representative of a community which struggles to go beyond appearances? The author gives us no more insight on these characters in the collection, however, in response to the question what defines a person's *Italianità* specifically in Italy, Komla-Ebri wrote the following:

Io sono in Italia da 34 anni, ho studiato e mi sono laureato a Bologna. In questi anni mi sono beato del genio di Raffaello, Da Vinci e Modigliani. Ho ascoltato la musica italiana da Verdi, Vivaldi, Rossini e Vasco Rossi. Ho letto da Dante, Calvino, Moravia a Erri De Luca. Parlo e scrivo discretamente la lingua e ne mastico alcuni dialetti. Mia moglie è italiana, i miei figli sono italiani, ho avuto la cittadinanza italiana, ho mangiato tanto di quegli spaghetti, tortellini e tagliatelle da essere italiano ad honorem senza disdegnare la polenta con la cazzuola e tanto meno le orecchiette con le cime di rape. Ho bevuto dal Barbaresco al Pino grigio, onorando il Chianti. Mi sono subito come tutti le crisi di governo che si sono susseguite in questi anni, gli scioperi, le code, i ritardi di treni, i Festival di Sanremo e ho tiffato appassionatamente per gli azzurri a tutti i mondiali, e esco per strada e un ragazzino di 14 anni mi vede e mi fa: extracomunitario.

Dov'è il mio diritto di cittadinanza? Dov'è la mia italianità? Lui ha 14 anni, io vivo qui da 34. Pago le tasse e mio malgrado ho salvato anche delle vite umane. Lui, ha fatto solo lo sforzo di nascere in Italia; o meglio sua mamma ha fatto lo sforzo di farlo nascere in Italia. Eppure lui, in base al suo diritto di nascita, diritto di sangue, diritto di suolo o meglio al suo colore di pelle mi dice che io non sono un cittadino italiano, sono quella specie di marziano che è l'extracomunitario: quella

parolaccia che continua a definirci per quello che non siamo.²⁷

Conclusion

In the 10 years since the collection of short stories *All'incrocio dei sentieri* was published the Italian social and political climate regarding migrants has changed dramatically. Recent events like the attack on a Roma camp in Turin²⁸ and the killing of two Senegalese vendors in December 2011²⁹ serve as a stark reminder of increasing intolerance and racism in today's Italy, as both attacks are not isolated incidents but part of a wider pattern of racist violence. Komla-Ebri's disappointment and bitterness are unmistakable and he is quite open about the fact that he is no longer sure that he made the right choice when he left France for Italy

negli ultimi tre anni, è in atto un processo culturale involutivo molto pericoloso, come testimoniano alcuni episodi inquietanti [...] Se prima il razzismo in Italia era latente, questi altri casi dimostrano che si è trasformato in fenomeno sociale e politico allarmante! A ciò hanno contribuito alcune leggi italiane sempre più discriminatorie verso colore che definiscono “i diversamente visibili”.³⁰

Notwithstanding this grim outlook Komla-Ebri's narrative continues to be a message of hope in a world divided and governed by prejudice

²⁷ Cited from an e-mail sent to me dated 15 April 2008.

²⁸ An angry mob attacked a Roma camp in Turin after a teenage girl falsely claimed she had been raped by two Roma men (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/11/italian-girl-rape-claim-gypsy>).

²⁹ A 50-year-old man with links to the extreme right opened fire on Senegalese street-vendors in Florence, killing two and seriously wounding three others. He then killed himself (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/13/florence-gunman-shoots-street-vendors>).

³⁰ Cited in an interview with Silvia Turrin in 2011 entitled “Intervista a Kossi Komla-Ebri” (<http://www.culture-nature-magazine.info>).

of the other. The author is adamant that harmonious living is possible only if the individual uniqueness of every culture is revered and relished. Assimilation and integration are not the answer. The world as Komla-Ebri believes, “non è un frullato dove tutto si mescola, bensì una macedonia dove il gusto di ogni singolo frutto contribuisce ad esaltare il sapore finale”.³¹

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