

IGIABA SCEGO'S LA MIA CASA È DOVE SONO (MY HOME IS WHERE I AM)

By Manishimwe Giselle Musabimana

The title of *My Home is Where I Am* (*La Mia Casa è Dove Sono*) captures the quintessence of this autobiographical work by Igiaba Scego, Somali-Italian writer, journalist, and activist. Born in Rome in 1974, to Somali refugees emigrated to Italy following Siad Barre's coup d'état 1969, Igiaba is one of the most prominent 'second-generation' voices active in the intellectual and political arena. Her works denounce the country's silence on its colonial legacy, which still taints modern mindsets and discourses. As well as being particularly vocal on the issue of migration, her works address the question of "Italians without citizenship", 'new-generation citizens', whom the government still fails to recognise. In her autobiography, Igiaba attempts to draw her home, or rather, her multiples 'homes'.

Mapping 'the land that does not exist': a journey through 'space' and '(post)memories'

The story begins during a convivial family time at

her brother Abdul's house, in Manchester: seated at the table are Igiaba's relatives gathered from different corners of Europe. To retrace their memories of Mogadishu, in a "saudade of exiles from their motherland", they try to draw a map of the now 'dead' city, urged by a need to enclose the memories of their former home on paper, "to survive". Standing in front of the finished map of Mogadishu, Igiaba finds herself at a "crossroads" when her nephew asks her if it is her city: after an initial bewilderment, she realises that the map is in fact incomplete, as it only



represents her city of origin. It is necessary to add her other city, Rome. The place where she was born, raised, and educated but where she is never considered "Italian enough". Her whole life revolves around this city and her family's memory of a Mogadishu that no longer exists, swept away by the "uncivil war".

The main thread of the book is "a mobile geography": the memory sites between Somalia and Italy are narrated through the moving lenses of Igiaba, who reflects on her childhood and family history, on the abrupt loneliness of being a refugee and on the wounds of the war she did not experience directly, but which she carries within herself like a boulder. In addition, the author reflects on her own multifaceted identity, often questioned, and on Italy, a country unknowingly tainted by its colonial heritage. The act of mapping the memory becomes a way to set a 'starting point' to answer the question, common among the exiled of the diaspora, Who am I, and where do I come from?

Although the novel depicts Igiaba's story and her 'geographies', it does not only capture her own personal experiences, but it also includes the lives and memoirs of her family. In particular, the novel portrays the life stories of her beloved mother and her father, Ali Omar Scego, the first governor of Mogadishu, Somali ambassador, and minister of finance. The first-person narration, mediated through Igiaba's eyes, recounts with an extraordinary emotional charge the family's experiences and memoirs, whether directly experienced or not. Igiaba speaks of "unlived wounds... that come from absences": this speaks on the theme "inherited memory", "absent memory" or "postmemory", that is, the enduring and tension-filled "relation to a parental past". In Igiaba's novel, post-memory is evident in the descriptions of the serene life of her family in Somalia before the "uncivil war", as well as in tragic events, like the killing of her uncle which happened long before her birth. These joys, the sorrows and memories are 'felt and experienced' by Igiaba through accounts of her relatives and 'revisited' and newly processed "by imaginative investment, projection, and creation". Nevertheless, I do not consider this novel to fall exactly into Postmemory Literature. While the family's life experiences are very much present, it is Igiaba's thoughts and emotions steering the story. These "inherited" memories are instead part of her personal recollections through which, as a second-generation daughter, she recognises her own 'heritage'

and finds parts of her identity.

Igiaba draws the map of her "land that is nowhere" starting from the monuments, buildings, streets, and places in the city of Rome, who name some of the chapters in the book (Teatro Sistina, Piazza Santa Maria sopra Minerva, La stele di Axum, Stazione Termini, Trastevere, Stadio Olimpico). The narrative, however, does not follow a precise route, for example from Rome to Mogadishu. Nor does it strictly follow the places mentioned in the chapter titles. The mobility is not a physical or purely descriptive one; instead, it is a journey flowing smoothly towards different directions, between physical places she has visited personally or through the memory of others; across the individual and collective imaginary of Somalia, to the forgotten accounts of the colonial past and the lingering questions of an unknown future. These 'visited' spaces highlight her multiple belongings and the multifaceted nature of her identity. What dictates the flow of the story is her emotional drive, her personal perceptions, and points of view, even as she recounts other people's events and adventures. It is a dynamic, heartfelt, and never neutral narrative, moving between worlds geographically distant from each other but linked by shared histories. This book does not only unfold on Igiaba's own personal life and those around her but is able to denounce and deal with bigger issues and teach history.

This book review will identify and outline the different, and often interconnected, macro-themes of the book, starting with the topic of her 'lands': Somalia and Italy.

Somalia, Italy and the condition of the Exile

Somalia and Italy are often put in relation to each other. The 'Somalia' she recalls and 'longs for' no longer exists, having been wiped out by the war, and the 'Italy' she lives in is stained by its colonial heritage. And where she struggles to feel at home. However, Somalia is not really her home either. And yet, she carries much of Somalia with her; she bears the love of storytelling, which for Igiaba and her family is an opportunity to vocalise and re-shape their memories and preserve connections with their ancestors. As mentioned above, she also carries the "unlived wounds" of the civil war and the pre-exile life in the Mogadishu she did not know; "wounds that come from absences", from the loss of dear lives, of memories of a glorious past and of a future now compro-

mised . "Even today, after nineteen years, the war holds me close. This is the fate of all Somalis" .

The topics of Somalia and Italy is intertwined with the experience of the tormented Somali diaspora, "imprisoned" between the motherland, the sense of guilt for the distance from relatives who have now become "unknown" and Italy, the ancient metropolis, now a 'new' country to which, however, they do not belong. The Somali family friends, acquaintances and even the nameless strangers encountered in the streets and throughout the story "poor disconnected beings" , 'half' creatures whose roots have been torn off, dispossessed of their identity . The chapter Stazione Termini (Ch.V), which Igiaba describes as the meeting place of the Somalis in Rome, encapsulates this collision of feelings of abandonment and precariousness, of desperation and melancholic hope of the Somali exiles. Igiaba sees that run-down train station as "a microcosm of life and death", where "life embraced you or spat in your face" . Igiaba didn't like walking through Termini station because it forced her to see all those "defeated souls" in the eyes; people who, like her parents, had left their whole lives behind, and who kept dwelling on the past. Left to their own devices, many of them would drink themselves into oblivion and like "black-skinned ghosts" wandered the corridors of the station "with their eyes fixed and their memory constantly going back to a past of pure joy" . In many instances, the arrival and life in Italy seem to represent for Igiaba the moment of "decadence" of her family. In Italy, the Scego family lives in poverty, in contrast to the 'glorious' past before their exile; they move between shabby boarding houses, stand in line in front of the charity centres, her father is almost never home pursuing a new profession as a trader. They lived "like suspended creatures" waiting for an 'undefined future' when they would finally return home. There appears to be a persisting tension with what has been and what her life could have been, had she been born and raised 'where she was destined to'. These feelings are common to many 'new generation' youths: the immanent questioning of what could have been, coupled with the unending conflict between two lands that perceive them both as foreigners, in different ways.

Denouncing Italy's colonial amnesia

The theme of the 'two lands' (Italy and Somalia) also moves on along the theme of (post)colonial relations.

The first chapter looks at the city of Mogadishu, tainted by Italian colonial legacy: Italy is in the names of streets and squares of Somali cities, and "in the faces of the rejected mestizos" . Even though Italian cities also have sites and relics named after former colonial territories, Italy and Italians continue to ignore their colonial history. "Italy had forgotten its colonial past. It had forgotten that it had put Somalis, Eritreans, Libyans and Ethiopians through hell. It had erased that history with an easy wipe" . In her autobiography, Igiaba denounces this amnesia; a mindset that is reflected in the popular expression "Italiani brava gente!" (Italians, good people!), a sugar-coated image of Italians as opposed to other countries and assumes the inherent goodness of the Italian people. And yet, Italians have killed, denigrated, and humiliated the populations with whom they have come into contact just as the English, French, Germans, Americans, and Portuguese did. Whilst in most former colonial countries there have been discussions and collective reflections on the past colonial imperialism and neo-colonialism, in Italy, there has been general amnesia . The subject is not even properly discussed at school. For those who have grown up in Italy or have lived in Italy, "Italiani brava gente!" is not a mere expression, but it represents the way Italians perceive the essence of being 'Italians': inherently welcoming, lovable, good-natured people, artists, lovers of beauty. And as such, an essence that could never be deemed racist. The accounts of Igiaba's childhood tell another story, showing dehumanizing scenarios of marginalization and ostracization. They tell us about a little girl who, unable to see herself represented anywhere, being described only through grotesque imagery (she mentions she was often compared to gorillas), decides to do everything she could to "disappear", and with her, extinguish her language, her heritage, her body.

"I was four or five years old. I wasn't yet an African who was proud of her black skin. I had not yet read Malcolm X. So, I decided to stop speaking Somali. I wanted to fit in at all costs, to conform to the mass. And my mass at the time was all as white as snow. Not speaking my native language became my cranky way of saying 'love me'.

But instead, nobody loved me" .

A quest for identity through storytelling

"I was underground. Hidden. I sometimes posed as a guest, sometimes as a villager. I played multiple roles:

I was a fullback and a center forward; an African and a European” .

The feeling of exile is closely tied to her own conception of identity. Igiaba sees herself as a “crossroads”, a “suspension bridge”, a person who lives “constantly on the edge” . Growing up in Italy as a child of immigrants, especially as a refugee, implies constantly feeling as the exception. It means longing to be represented, and never finding someone to look up to in the media, in literature, in the surroundings. It means constantly asking themselves Who am I?

Over the course of the book, Igiaba deals with this immanent question, which she had carried along ever since she was a child. She tried to find an answer by mapping her ‘land(s)’, her ‘homes’ transcending rigid geographical borders. Igiaba’s identity, as a Somali and Italian woman, doesn’t bear simple rhetorical definitions. To address this apparently simple question Igiaba tells her life story in this book, taking up the custom she had learned from her family: the art of storytelling.

In Igiaba’s childhood and throughout her life, storytelling was home, support, comfort, and a weapon. For Somalis, “telling stories was never a waste of time” , and the word occupies a place of honour. Through storytelling, people learned how to use words wisely. And again, through storytelling, they learned to make sense of things, because “for Somali nomads, the solution is always hidden within the story” . Through her mother’s stories of Somalia, Igiaba learns to know those parts of herself that she did not understand, did not see, and could not appreciate in Italy. Her mother’s stories wanted her to understand the richness of her origins, of her ancestral land:

“She wanted me to understand that we didn’t come from nowhere; that behind us was a country, traditions, a history. There weren’t just the ancient Romans and Gauls, there wasn’t just Latinorum and the Greek agora. There was also the ancient Egypt and the incense gatherers of the Land of Punt, our Somalia. There were the Ashanti and Bambara kingdoms. She wanted to make me proud of my black skin and the land we had to leave behind.” .

Conclusion

The last chapter of the book is entitled *Essere Italiano per me - Being Italian to me*. Towards the end of the chapter,

Igiaba wonders about the answer to this question: what does it mean to be Italian? For Igiaba, the answers are far too many to be contained in one single concept, in a few lines. For Igiaba, being Italian also means, among many other things, “being condemned to eternal anguish”. But in that moment, she is reminded of a tale she had read as a teenager, *The Cardinal’s First Tale* by Karen Blixen, where, when asked to explain who he was, the cardinal responded: “I will answer with a classic rule: I will tell a story”. Igiaba once again recognises storytelling as her means of making sense of her identity, without reducing it to labels unable to encompass the multitude of her essences. And it is also for this reason that the title of the book, *La mia Casa è Dove Sono - My Home is Where I Am*, is of particularly pertinent: it encapsulates the dynamism and multiformity of the self, which cannot be only traced back to where we were born, or where we grew up. Igiaba’s fluid and decisive writing paints here a cosmopolitan conception of identity and being, thus refuting aside the idea of purity and “nativity” .

“No one is pure in this world. We are never just black or just white. We are the fruit of an encounter or a clash. We are crossroads, crossing points, bridges. We are mobile. And we can fly with wings hidden in the folds of our heavenly souls” .

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