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The Quest for Identity Through Bodily Pain. Female Abjection in the literary work of Igiaba Scego

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*This article addresses how (cultural) identity in Igiaba Scego's literary works is achieved through a struggle of bodily pain. Narrating from a female point of view, Scego explores in depth the female migrant condition which in her texts is accentuated by the migrant body's diversity and subsequent enhanced visibility. When reading Scego's literary work, the conflictual relationship that many of her protagonists have with notions such as identity and cultural belonging is striking. Her protagonists' autoanalytical questioning and lack of unity in terms of identity sometimes results in painful and self-inflicted bodily expressions, and this paper's analysis of Scego's hybrid and suffering protagonists is based on readings of the novels *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) and *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010), as well as the short story 'Salsicce' (2005a).*

Introduction

A recurring aspect of contemporary migrant narratives, be they literary, cinematic or aesthetic, is the representation and problematising of such concepts as home, belonging and identity. In the present article, I focus on how three of the protagonists in the literary works of Igiaba Scego, an Italian-Somali author, undergo processes of bodily pain in order to come to terms with their identity which, in the terminology of postcolonial studies, is characterised by *hybridity* and *in-betweenness* (Bhabha, 1994 [2004]; Bhabha, 1996).

Igiaba Scego, one of Italy's leading authors of so-called migrant literature, was born in 1974 in Rome to Somali parents, who had settled in Italy after fleeing the Siad Barre coup in 1969. Scego, who holds a PhD in pedagogy, collaborates with major Italian newspapers, such as *La Repubblica*, *L'Unità* and *Internazionale*, as well as literary magazines that address migrant issues, such as the online magazine *El-Ghibli*, and she is one of the most prominent voices in the cultural

debate on topics such as the situation of second and third generation migrants, racism and cultural identity. She has been awarded several literary prizes for her novels and short stories, including the Mondello Award for the autobiographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010, *My home is where I am*) in 2011, and the Eks&tra Prize for migrant writers for the short story 'Salsicce' ('Sausages') in 2003.

Scego's literary characters are, in many ways, inspired by the author's own life experience of being born and raised by migrants in Rome; her protagonists are often of the same cultural background, experiencing similar challenges to those that the author herself has probably encountered, and Scego frequently debates issues of identity and belonging in Italian settings, not only in her essayistic and journalistic works, but also in her literary production. However, the definition of Scego as a migrant author is debatable, being born in Rome, she herself is not a migrant¹, but her texts do present and problematise issues connected with migration and the migrant's position, thus destabilising the antithetical concept of the relationship between *here* and *there*, between the culture of origin and that of destination and the conception of purity and unity. Therefore, I will state that her writing exemplifies the description of migrant literature as advanced by the literary critic Carine Mardorossian, which is that of a 'cosmopolitan, transnational, and hybrid vision of life' (Mardorossian 2002, p. 17).

Many of Scego's protagonists are oscillating and searching between, and choosing from, different expressions of identity, and they are also often confronted with other people's pre-established conception of their sense of belonging; standing out as black Italians in a still fairly homogeneous white Italy, at least according to a stereotypical idea of Italian society, demanding of them to choose between either a Somali or an Italian identity. Thus, when reading Scego's literary work, the conflictual relationship that many of her protagonists have with notions such as identity and cultural belonging is striking. Her protagonists' autoanalytical questioning and lack of unity in terms of identity sometimes results in painful and self-inflicted bodily expressions, such as mutism, bulimia, violation of religious taboos, headaches, shame, destructive sexual relationships and rage, among others. Therefore, the destabilising of concepts such as culture and identity that occurs in Scego's texts is not a peaceful, joyous or harmonious process. Therefore, I claim here that the questioning of, and the search for, identity and belonging that Scego's protagonists carry out, in regard to both migrant hybrid identity and gender identity, are painful physical and psychological processes. What is the relationship between these physical expressions of pain and the literary characters' questioning of identity? Do they find the answers to their questions, and is there an end to the painful processes leading towards acceptance of their identity? In order to discuss these questions, I will focus on the representations of *belonging* and *identity quest* through *processes of bodily pain*, as portrayed by several of Scego's literary female characters. The discussion will be primarily based on the autobiographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono*, the short story 'Salsicce' and the novel *Oltre Babilonia* (2008, *Beyond Babylon*).

Painful Belonging

As previously stated, many of the characters in Scego's literary works struggle with their identity, and I will introduce my discussion on painful belongings with the autofictional novel *La mia casa è dove sono*. It was first published in 2010, and tells the story of Igiaba Scego's childhood and of her family, which is spread across the world. At the same time, the author-protagonist comments on contemporary issues in Italian society, such as the situation for second-generation young people confronted with the *jus sanguinis* principle for citizenship and the Bossi-Fini law of 2002ⁱⁱ which represented a harsh tightening of Italian migration legislation, and which was criticised by both the UN and Italian politicians.

The story starts with Igiaba visiting her brother, who lives in Manchester, UK, and, in order to remember the Mogadishu of their childhood and adolescence, they, together with other family members, begin to draw a map of the city, which, now, ruined by years of civil war, does not exist in its former state. The sketched representation of the city, and all the memories connected to it, leads Igiaba to ponder on her conception of identity and reflect upon her multiple sense of cultural belonging:

What does it mean to me to be Italian...
I had no answer. I had a hundred.
I am Italian, but also not.
I am Somali, but also not.
A crossroad. A junction.
A mess. A headache.
I was a trapped animal.
A being condemned to eternal anguish. (Scego 2012 [2010], p. 159)ⁱⁱⁱ

As can be observed in the above quote, the protagonist's double identity is experienced as a crossroads between several identities, making it difficult for her to choose between them. Interrogating this multiplicity, she feels like a trapped animal, restless and without escape routes, and like someone condemned to eternal torment, alluding to an infernal state of anguish without any solutions to improve things. One of the answers to Igiaba's troubled identity quest is to be found earlier in the novel when the author-protagonist is looking at a photo of her grandfather, and she concludes her pondering with a comment on the hybridity and flexibility of all human kind:

The whiteness of that skin [her grandfather's skin] disturbed the idea of my proud African identity which I had constructed. No one is pure in this world. We're not just black or white. We are the result of a meeting or of a collision. We are crossroads, crossing points, bridges. We are mobile. (Scego 2012 [2010], p. 81)

The protagonist of 'Salsicce', published as one of a collection of short stories entitled *Pecore nere*^{iv} (2005a, *Black Sheep*), expresses a similar feeling to the protagonist Igiaba in the autofictional novel; that of being

torn between two identities. 'Salsicce' tells the story of a young Italian-Somali woman who is experiencing an identity crisis, due to the previously mentioned Bossi-Fini law. She asks herself if her Italian passport is sufficient evidence of her *Italianness*, as she recalls her interview with the Italian citizenship authorities, during which she was asked if she felt more Italian or more Somali:

That vile question of my damned identity! More Somali? More Italian? [...] I don't know what to answer! I have never "fractioned" myself before [...] Naturally, I lied. I don't like doing it, but I had no choice. I looked right into those bulging eyes of hers and said: "Italian". And then, even if I'm as black as coal, I turned red as a beetroot. I would have felt like an idiot even if I had said "Somali". I am not a 100% anything. I never have been, and I don't think I can be now. I think I am a woman with no identity. Better yet, a woman with several identities. (Scego 2005a, p. 28)⁹

In a similar manner to Igiaba in the autofictional novel, the young woman is unable to make a clear choice between an Italian and a Somali identity; she emphasises the fact that she, as the autofictional Igiaba, has multiple identities, by creating a list of things that make her feel Somali:

Let's see: I feel Somali when 1) I drink tea with cardamom, cloves and cinnamon; 2) I pray five times a day facing Mecca; 3) I wear my dirah; [...]; 9) I speak Somali and add my two cents worth in loud, shrill tones whenever there's an animated conversation; 10) I look at my nose in the mirror and I think it's perfect; 11) I suffer the pangs of love; 12) I cry for my country ravaged by civil war; 13) Plus 100 other things I just can't remember right now! (Scego 2005a, p. 29)

And some of the things that make her feel Italian:

I feel Italian when: 1) I eat something sweet for breakfast; 2) I go to art exhibitions, museums and historic buildings; 3) I talk about sex, men and depression with my girlfriends; 4) I watch movies with the following actors: Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni, [...] Roberto Benigni and Massimo Troisi [...]; 9) I rant and rave for the most disparate reasons against the prime minister, the mayor, the alderman or whomever happens to be the president; 10) I talk with my hands; 11) I weep for the partisans, all too often forgotten; [...] 13) plus 100 other things I can't keep track of! (Scego 2005a, pp. 29-30)

The young woman realises that she is the sum of all the things she has listed, and they make her feel simultaneously Somali and Italian. As pointed out by Hanna (2004), Scego's 'Salsicce' insists on multiplicity and hybridity, and I believe that the two lists quoted above replace the conception of identity as *either/or*, and rather emphasise the fact that different identities or expressions of cultural belonging can co-exist within the same individual without suppressing or favouring any of them. And for the short story's protagonist this is crucial, from now on she will not hide her hybridity and pretend to be someone she is not:

'Would I be more Italian with a sausage in my stomach? Would I be less Somali? Or the complete opposite? No, I would be the same—the same mix—and if this bothers someone, I won't give a damn in the future!' (Scego 2005a, p. 35).

In my opinion, the young woman in 'Salsicce' and Igiaba from *La mia casa è dove sono* both represent what Homi Bhabha calls in-betweenness, and they come to terms with their puzzle of identity through what Bhabha defines as the *Third Space* (Bhabha, 1994 [2004]): a space that is created when cultures or individuals meet and interact. According to Bhabha, meaning is produced when entities such as *you* and *I*, *familiar culture* and *new culture* meet in this metaphoric Third Space. Thus, the Third Space is a position of conflict in which we are confronted with the new and the unfamiliar, but it is also a space that opens up a dialogue between individuals and cultures. A negotiation of cultural identity and mutual understanding or recognition of cultural differences can be produced via the meetings occurring in this Third Space. According to Bhabha, this does not mean a neutralisation of the differences, rather, a productive dialogue between those same differences. I assert that, with one foot in each culture, the two women of 'Salsicce' and *La mia casa è dove sono* represent Bhabha's in-betweenness. The protagonists' different cultural experiences exist side-by-side, and the two women converge and intermingle multiple identities, exemplifying an in-between hybrid identity. Furthermore, the doubts they both feel and the conflicts they experience, demonstrate a position similar to Bhabha's Third Space, and the conflict becomes a critique of essentialist understandings of concepts such as *fixed identity* and *original culture*. I assert that they launch themselves into the Third Space, in which entities like identity and cultural meaning have no 'primordial unity or fixity', as Bhabha claims, and in which the 'same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew' (2004 [1994], p. 55).

Although Igiaba from *La mia casa è dove sono* and the protagonist of 'Salsicce' are bewildered because of the many accessible expressions of culture and identity they have at hand, in the polyphonic novel *Oltre Babilonia*, published in 2008, Zuhra Laamane and Mar Ribero Martino experience other sides of the in-between position and the hybrid identity they embody.^{vi} As we have seen previously, the young woman of 'Salsicce' asks herself if her passport is sufficient to prove her Italianness, and Zuhra in *Oltre Babilonia*, similarly preoccupied with the idea of convincing others of the authenticity of her passport, reacts as follows when she looks at it before leaving Rome, quite unwillingly, persuaded by a friend to take an Arabic language course in Tunis during her summer holiday:

I pull out my burgundy passport. I watch it. Zuhra Laamane. Me with my mother's last name, even if she doesn't use it. Me, me myself, in person, flesh and bones, tits, pussy and all. Me, Italian. Me, Italian? And the film club card? Well, I'll bring that one with me too. And the supermarket fidelity card? The one from the National Library? Yes, I'll bring them all. And even the one from the gas station. Every little

bit will help. Each one of these damned cards have my name in capital letters, don't they? Proof of my residence in the Eternal City as well. Unfortunately, they don't say that I am Italian, but at least they show that I live here. They'll strengthen the Italianness of my passport. (Scego 2008, p. 39)

During previous travels and stays abroad, Zuhra has encountered difficulties regarding her Italian citizenship (Scego, 2008), putting her in humiliating situations because of her non-stereotypical Italian looks; difficulties that now make her even more conscious of her norm-divergent appearance and that also make her feel uneasy.

The in-betweenness that we meet in Scego's literary texts is played out in both cultural and bodily contexts: from the music they listen to and the TV shows and films they like to watch, as we have seen in 'Salsicce', to the manner in which they walk (Scego, 2005b) and the way they relate to their skin colour. However, not all of Scego's literary characters come to terms with their hybridity; at times, the hybridity that they live every day is harshly judged by the migrant character her/himself, as in the case of Mar:

Me, Mar Ribero Martino, what is the meaning with me? I am the result of the Third World. A black father, a mother who is the daughter of Southerners. Pigmented by stains of slavery and exploitation. I am a land of conquest. Earth to crush. Colourless hybrid fruit. Without place. A half-blood that does not belong to anything. My blood is contaminated. There are too many others in me [...] Half blood. Seminegra. I'm ashamed. For the blacks I'm not dark enough. For the whites, not quite clear enough. (Scego 2005b, pp. 388-89, italics in orig.)

Of all the characters in migration, in *Oltre Babilonia*, Mar is the most troubled about her hybridity, having severe difficulties coming to terms with her mixed Somali-Argentinian origins, not being either white or black, not being either African or European or Latin American. As shown previously, although the protagonists of 'Salsicce' and *La mia casa è dove sono* realise that they must accept their identities as something hybrid, and that their identities are enriched by their heterogeneous and mixed backgrounds, Mar feels empty and never at peace with her in-between and hybrid existence. Instead, she feels rootless and without a place to call home, like an eternal stranger and imposter, as we shall see in the following quote. Mar, travelling to Tunis with her mother, the celebrated poet Miranda, to follow a language course in Arabic at the same language school that Zuhra attends, compares Tunis to herself:

Tunis, sustainable Africa. Africa for experienced pockets, white, fat, and dirty pockets. A surrogate of Africa. Fiction. Almost a joke. Like her, Mar Ribero Martino, an endless simulation. A bit of Africa, a bit of Latin America, a bit of Europe. In one word, empty. She, Mar Ribero Martino, was always a foreigner. She belonged to no one. An eternal vagabond. (Scego 2005b, p. 326)

In Mar's eyes, Tunis is a hybrid fake of the African continent, analogous to her own way of being. Mar, then, appears to represent those who search for surety and stability in terms of identity. Far from the autofictional Igiaba in *La mia casa è dove sono* and the protagonists of 'Salsicce', Mar rather represents those who struggle with migrant rootlessness and emptiness, feeling that they don't belong anywhere. She depicts the opposite frame of mind to the two aforementioned protagonists, turning the novel *Oltre Babilonia* into a realistic representation of the world, marked by mobility, migration and hybridity.

Abjection and Reconciliation

Abject artworks, as defined by the Tate gallery, are: 'artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily "functions"' (Tate Gallery 2018), and according to the psychoanalytic theorist and critic Julia Kristeva, literature is one of the privileged places for exploring the abject, because it makes it possible to examine what happens when boundaries break down, such as the distinction between the self and the other, the subject and the object (Kristeva, 1982).

In the following, I explore the concept of the abject, and I will discuss how acts of abjection form part of the identity quest carried out by the character Zuhra from *Oltre Babilonia* and the young woman in the short story 'Salsicce'. Is it possible to interpret Zuhra's focus on menstrual blood as an abject movement within the novel? Does she, with the return of her capacity to see the red colour of her own blood, succeed in bridging the gap between herself and the estranged and colourless menstruation blood, between the subject and the abject? Will the return of the colour red make her reconcile with a more unified identity? And what happens when the young Sunni Muslim in 'Salsicce' vomits before eating the sausages she has cooked for herself in order to prove her Italianness? Is it possible to consider the vomiting as a violent act of abjection, and will it break down the protagonist's attempt to convince herself of the sincerity and purity of her Italianness?

According to Kristeva, 'what is abject [...] is radically excluded and draws me [the subject] toward the place where meaning collapses' (1982, p. 2). The abject is thus what threatens constructs such as 'identity, system, order', and it is 'what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (1982, p. 4). The abjection, then, is the response to that which threatens to break down the distinction between the inside and the outside of the body, between the self and the other, between the subject and the object, what, in other words, threatens to break down pre-established meaning and boundaries. In Kristeva's theoretical discussion, the abjection becomes the subject's experience of the liminal space, or the encounter between the subject itself and the object, the other. Bodily fluids, such as vomit, blood and semen, as well as excrement, might provoke the sensation of abjection, as well as a corpse and wounds because this makes the subject aware of the body's boundaries. To

exemplify her reflections on the abject, in 'Approaching Abjection', published in *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva presents the example of skimmed milk and nail parings as an everyday experience with the abject: 'when the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasm in the stomach' (1982, pp. 2-3). Using the example of skimmed milk, she turns to the core of the abject: '[...] since food is not an "other" for "me", who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out. I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself' (1982, p. 3). According to Kristeva, abjection must occur before the subject can enter the mirror stage, during which the boundaries and distinctions between the self and the other occur. She therefore relates the abject to the maternal because the creation of these boundaries is initiated by the separation from the maternal body, that is, when the child no more considers the mother an extension of its own body. Paradoxically, this symbolic separation from the mother's body, which initiates the child's process towards subjectivity, also inaugurates the desire for a reunion with the maternal body and a return to a phase in which the child's needs were taken care of, without question. The mother, then, becomes both the abject and the desired object.

Abjection and 'Salsicce'

Faced with the doubt of her identity, the protagonist in 'Salsicce' decides to buy some sausages from her local butcher, cook them and eat them. In order to prove to herself that she is sufficiently Italian, and that she belongs to the Italian culture, the young woman, a Sunni Muslim, decides to break an important religious taboo. The attempt to eat the sausages ends in the young woman throwing up before she has even tasted them:

Looking the other way, I put them on the blue dish. The beauty of the dish has highlighted the ugliness of these badly boiled sausages. I sit down. I get up to fetch a glass of water. I sit down again. My legs won't stop trembling, and my wrist shakes. I stick my fork in the smaller sausage. I raise it to my nose—yuck, it stinks!

I shut my eyes and bring the filthy sausage to my lips. I am conscious of an acid, vomit-like taste in my mouth. So this is what sausages taste like—vomit? Then I feel something wet on my chest, so I open my eyes. I'm shocked to see that I've thrown up my breakfast: a bowl of cereal with cold milk and an apple. And the sausage? Where's the sausage? There it is, still whole, stuck on the fork. I didn't have time to put it in my mouth before I threw up. This is a sign!

I am not meant to eat this sausage. For the first time my head begins to form conscious thoughts. "What if it was all a mistake?"

Sure, if I eat this pseudo-sausage covered with canary yellow scales of vomit I might (possibly) be Italian, but then, what about Somalia? What am I going to do with Somalia—trash it? (Scego 2005, pp. 31-32)

The sausages become an enforced mark of identity of Italianness, which the protagonist physically repulses. This is not only because they are made of pork, but just as much because they represent a forced intrusion into her identity, threatening to annihilate or make her renounce a large part of her selfhood. In 'Salsicce', the body becomes a meeting place for the public and the private, between society's persistent demands on the protagonist to demonstrate her belonging to Italian culture, and her private and intimate relationship with both her religion and her sense of identity. In this sense, it could be stated that she takes part in what Vetri (2011) calls a bodily sense war, in which the migrant character is regarded a 'transgressor of the senses as well as a cultural transgressor' (p. 171). According to Vetri, the body is always changing, realigning itself 'to comply with the body norms of the new cultural environment and thus achieve a feeling of solidarity' (p. 171), as we have seen the protagonist of the short story initially try to do. Her attempt to comply with the pre-given norms of Italianness, represented by the sausages, fails to succeed thanks to the act of abjection, leading her instead to accept her hybrid identity. Instead of a complete integration of the migrant character and a neutralisation of differences, the young woman represents the literary characters of those authors who 'by overriding ethnic, linguistic, sexual, and cultural barriers, through new shades of realism that center on the sensorial body [...] have begun to explore the possibility of a suspension of such identities in favor of a solidarity through the universal condition of bodily suffering and pleasure' (Vetri 2011, p. 173).

Sciubba (2016) carried out an analysis of Scego's first novel, *Rhoda* (2004), from the perspective of Kristeva's notion of the abject, discussing the structures of abjection 'located at the intersections of gender, sexuality, colonialism, religion, racialisation, and migration within the novel' (2016, p. 137). Scego's debut novel tells the story of Somali migrants Rhoda, her sister, Aisha, and their aunt, Birni. Although Aisha successfully searches for integration into Italian society, Rhoda, struggling with her identity as a Black Italian, as well as with her own homosexuality, becomes a prostitute marginalised on the outskirts of that same Italian society.^{vii} According to Sciubba, Rhoda's body becomes 'the site for the ultimate enactment of abjectifying practices and representations' (2016, p. 149), and the character Rhoda herself is 'a fictional martyr functioning as a symbol for the many abjectified and voiceless 'strange bodies', whose identities do not fit into preconceived paradigms of belonging' (2016, p. 150). In *Rhoda*, Sciubba considers abjection an effective device for representing the people who are obliged to inhabit the border zones within social, national or heterosexual normatives: 'Abject beings that [...] are compelled to develop alternative agencies through subversive, at times repulsive, strategies, thus blurring the boundary between the inside and the outside, the socially and morally acceptable and the execrable, the self and the other' (Sciubba 2016, p. 150).

The plots of 'Salsicce' and *Rhoda* are quite different from one another, but the two protagonists are faced with similar doubts about their identities representing the in-between and the ambiguous, in Kristeva's

words. However, although the two women come to different conclusions, the act of abjection is central to both their stories and the development of the two plots. Rhoda's story is an account of an identity quest that leads to devastating and tragic results, while the protagonist of 'Salsicce' refuses to remain within stereotypical and pre-set frames of identity and cultural belonging. Her body does not become a site of abjection, as in Rhoda's case, rather, the act of abjection becomes an act of liberation and recognition. It is through the act of throwing up, that is, refusing to incorporate the (strong) cultural identity marker of Italian culinary identity, that the young woman comes to terms with her hybrid identity. If she can't live and embody both her Somali and her Italian identity, she will be no-one, a person with no identity at all. The abject in this short story makes the protagonist, in the words of Kristeva, establish herself as a subject. She doesn't accept the symbolic and physical incorporation represented by the sausages, thus refusing the reductive and dualistic conception represented by the question of whether she is more Somali or more Italian. As stated previously (section 2), she instead chooses to embrace her hybrid and multiple identity.

Zuhra's abject

The five narrators of *Oltre Babilonia* all tell their own stories of violence, gender and identity questioning, abuse and self-harming, but in the following analysis of abjection and the abject in the novel, I will focus on Zuhra, who appears to be the main protagonist as she both introduces and concludes the novel with a prologue and an epilogue, respectively, weaving together the different parts of this polyphonic novel.

As a child still living in Somalia, Zuhra was sent to a convent school where she was sexually abused by one of the teachers, an Italian man by the name of Aldo, implying, as I see it, an acute postcolonial critique from the author's perspective: the innocent Somali child and the abusing white man violently taking advantage of her functions as a comment on colonial Italy during its brutal imperial regime in Italian East Africa (1936–1941) in the Fascist era. Shortly after the abuse was discovered, Zuhra emigrated to Italy with her mother Maryam, to be reunited with Zuhra's father, Elias, who had escaped the Somali military regime before Zuhra was born. Although Elias was nowhere to be found, Maryam decides to stay in Rome and make a future there for her daughter.

Walking around Rome during a school excursion, Zuhra realises that she can't see the colours surrounding her, and she reflects upon the connection between the sexual abuse she has suffered and the long-term consequences, such as the loss of colours and her difficulty in letting herself love and be touched by a man:

I am colourless. Without defenses. Virgin. Alone. [...] I'm a little ashamed of this, it's just that the virgins are a bit discolored, very

nervous, too. I'd love to find a guy, I'd really like to see the colours again, but no one goes to the supermarket to buy a colour or a guy, it's a lot more complicated than that. Sure, of all the girls in the fifth grade, I'm the only one still with her heart's hymen intact. Out of eight girls, I'm the only one still in this absurd state. Only I have a stitched membrane in my heart. (Scego 2008, p. 9)

In order to feel whole again, Zuhra very meticulously searches every corner of the city to get her colours back, and when the narration begins, the only colour she is still missing is the colour red. The colour of love and blood:

That uncle [title given to men in Somalia] took all my colors, all of them. He took them with him, but it is not OK. He had already taken another part of me; couldn't he have left me at least the colors? Because of this I now look for them like a madwoman all over Rome. Ranieri [Zuhra's teacher] said that in Rome we stumble on colors. That's why I keep walking deeper into the city. At the Park of Veio I found the yellow one, dangling lazily. *Wallahi billahi*, it slept like a stupid sloth. And the green one? What an adventure, the green one! It was lost in the squares of Piazza Vittorio, among the spinach and the Argentine mate. But I got it back, eh, where did it think it was going? I have even been able to recover all the shades of black. Soon I will have a beautiful bag full of colors. When I've restored them all, I will be ready and I will make love to a man. A man I will like very much. It is just that without colors, you cannot make love. It would be all wrong [...] To tell you the truth, the bag just misses the red one now. I was close to it once. Right here I saw it [...] I'm sure it will return, sooner or later. (Scego 2008, pp. 10-11)

Exploring the different zones of Rome, Zuhra, slowly, but surely, as we see in the previous quote, recovers the lost colours connecting them closely with the places in which she finds them.

As mentioned previously, *Oltre Babilonia* both starts and ends with Zuhra's voice, and, in both the prologue and the epilogue, her focus is on menstrual blood. Zuhra, who can't yet see the redness of her own blood at this point in the novel, yearns to be able to see the red streams flowing from her body, as she herself expresses:

People are afraid of the word menstruation; they have a total panic. People panic when something is too true. Before going to Dr. Ross [the nickname of Zuhra's psychologist], I was afraid of it too. I didn't mention it; I didn't say anything about it. I was under the illusion that it would disappear from my life forever if I didn't name it. I dreamt of a permanent menopause. I don't hate it. At first a bit, yeah. [...] But not because it is painful. Everyone else hates it for that reason. [...] But it was not because of the pain that I didn't mention it. Not because of the physical one, at least. It was because of another pain. Every time it arrived, every time I saw my dirty underpants, it saddened me. [...] I looked at my underwear, at the toilet paper and it saddened me. I looked carefully at everything. I stood there, hoping that something would happen. Usually nothing happened. They have told me that menstruation has the color of blood [...] It is red. But I only know it from hearsay. When I look at my underwear, I only see

a gray dot. [...] I'd like to see that thread of red gushing from my legs. (Scego 2008, pp. 16-17)

The long internal monologue takes place in a café in Rome. Zuhra realises that her period has started, and the thought of ruining her new white pants, thus underlining the contrast between the whiteness and the innocence of the white pants and the filthiness of the menstrual blood, makes her reflect on both her own and others' relationship with the word 'menstruation'. Not, as she says in the monologue, the *period*, the *flow*, the *crimson wave* or *Aunt Flo*, but the medical and clinical, and the maybe more estranging term, menstruation, comparing its use with an act of subversion (Scego 2008, p. 16).

While Zuhra is waiting for the red colour to return to her, she starts to write down, in red notebooks of course, memories of things she experiences, people she meets etc., regarding her life-experiences as proper for a novel. Her psychologist, who connects Zuhra's somatic expression of the childhood trauma to her loss of female identity, thinks that the writing process will allow Zuhra to get in touch with her femininity:

the doctor [...] liked the idea of me writing. Because of that feminine which should come out. I didn't understand it, though. Feminine? Why, can't they see that I'm a girl? I have a big bum, tits, small though, a pussy, [...], a heart-shaped mouth—what do I miss to demonstrate it? And then, once every twenty-eight days, I have the menstruation. (Scego 2008, p.16)

Zuhra sums up some of her physical characteristics; she has a vagina and menstruation, so she is a woman, but she also has noticeable buttocks and heart-shaped lips, attributes that coincide with a gender-stereotypical and hetero-normative conception of femininity. So, which one of the so-called feminine characteristics is she missing in order to be a complete woman? Warmth? The ability to care for others? She doesn't care about fashion, and she cuts her hair short, but does this really mean that she's not in contact with her femininity? Does her psychologist's view on Zuhra's femininity concern her behaviour or any of her physical attributes? Or perhaps it is her way of thinking about, and dealing with, her surroundings and her own body? Or does it pertain to her difficulties in having a physical relationship with men? Which of the gender stereotypes describing femininity should Zuhra get in touch with, according to her psychologist? The novel doesn't reveal any answer to these questions. In my opinion, it instead emphasises and criticises stereotypical notions of gender through the voice of Zuhra.

Every time Zuhra gets too physically close to a man, she ends up with anxiety attacks and breakdowns, but during her stay in Tunis, a healing process starts. The turning point comes when she returns to Rome after the Arabic language course, symbolically represented in the following, liberating, dream of giving birth:

I had stronger and more frequent contractions. After that I do not remember what happened [...] Instead of a baby, only long iron bars. They looked horrible, heavy and some of them were even rusty. [...] I got up feeling well from that dream. Sweaty, but with a heart beating at the correct pace. [...] I touched my belly and I felt light as a butterfly. [...] I did not give birth. I just expelled it [...] Then, when I was awake, I touched my belly, I even touched my vagina. I felt so light! I have gone beyond Babylon, do you understand? Beyond everything, to a place where my vagina is happy and in love. (Scego 2008, p. 449)

Although the abject movement in Zuhra's case previously revolved mainly around her complex relationship with menstruation, at this point in the healing process it manifests itself through labour and the final expelling of the symbolical iron bars that have so far kept her captive. It may also appear that the pain of abjection that Zuhra has experienced may be required of her to live in order for her to find answers to the quest for a more unified identity.

As we have observed, the Arabic language course Zuhra attended initiates her healing process, and, introducing the novel's last chapter, the epilogue, Zuhra connects the Somali language to motherhood and pregnancy:

I wonder if my mother's mother tongue can be a mother to me [...] In Somali I found the comfort of her uterus, in Somali I've heard the only lullabies she sang to me, in Somali I certainly had my first dreams. [...] When she talks, my mother is always pregnant. She gives birth to the other mother, to her mother tongue. I like to listen to her. It makes me travel inside her. I want to be silent forever, just listening to her. Witness a mother giving birth to a mother. (Scego 2008, pp. 443-445)

Once again, the author turns to the images of pregnancy and childbirth, but this time it is not the atrocious but liberating birth of iron bars, but instead the desire to be reunited with the mother's safe womb as a metaphor for coming home and feeling at peace with the Somali language and culture.

The last piece of Zuhra's identity puzzle appears to fall into place shortly after her return from Tunis and the dream quoted above, when she receives her father's recorded life story. In the recordings, she finds not only an account of her father's life, but also of her close relatives, all of the stories that lead to her own and her mother's life stories. These stories enable her to find a sense of a self, represented through the redness of her menstrual blood, and, although the concluding part of the epilogue changes from first to third person narration, the focus remains on Zuhra:

She picks up her panties. [...] They are dirty. A wet, large spot. It looks like a star. Maybe it is. It is a red star. A bit wet. But beautiful. It emanates light. A menstrual star that shines only for her, endlessly. The form is dispersed. The star expands. A constellation. Inside the

constellation, the story of her womanhood. And in her story, the one of others before her and others after her. The stories are interwoven, sometimes they converge and often they create each other. All of them united by a love of color. [...] In a moment the constellation dissolves lightly. Fades, leaving a halo of red. And if this was love in Rome? A shade of red? (Scego 2008, p. 456)

As we can understand from the quote, the redness of her menstrual blood makes Zuhra step into the story of womanhood; she is finally able to see the red colour of her own blood, she feels like a woman so alike to those in the generations before her and to those that will come.

Opening and concluding the novel with the focus on menstrual blood, the polyphonic structure resembles the menstrual cycle. It also demonstrates Zuhra's focus on the abject. The colourless menstrual blood, which both saddens and makes her long for its redness, not only marks the distinction between the inside and the outside of Zuhra's body, it also marks the difference between Zuhra herself and other women. The blood, just like the mother in Kristeva's theory of abjection, becomes both the repulsive abject and something with which the protagonist desires a reunion. And it is through that same blood that Zuhra gains a more complete sense of identity: she has suffered sexual abuse from which she slowly heals; she is the fruit of two different cultures, the Somali and the Italian, a background that makes her a racialised black woman in a white Italy, but, as the novel concludes, she is also part of a long line of women telling their story.

The centrality given to the body ties together the projects of the protagonist of 'Salsicce' and of Zuhra in *Oltre Babilonia*. In accordance with the statement by Barbarulli (2012) in an article on the body in Italian migrant literature, the body in the two texts written by Scego does not represent an object of abuse only, a body that is scrutinised and judged and written *about* in other words, rather it has become a space of resistance that writes itself 'establishing thus a poetic and political space of denunciation, transit and of utopia' (Barbarulli 2012, p. 2, my translation). The body in 'Salsicce' resists conforming with established conceptions of Italianness, while, by regaining the capacity to see all the colours again, Zuhra's body in *Oltre Babilonia* shows how the sensorial body interacts with its surroundings. Zuhra lets the city of Rome, with its streets and smells, colours and monuments, permeate her, making her feel one step or colour at a time, closer to an identity of her own.

Conclusion

As both Vetri (2011) and Barbarulli (2012) show, Scego writes herself into a tradition of migrant literature that emphasises an embodied experience of pain and trauma, and in which 'the relationship between language [...], identity, and the ontological status of the body becomes a crucial concern' (Vetri 2011, p. 169). In this analysis, I have examined the relationship between the bodily pain and the identity quest that Scego's female protagonists experience. In an interview with Daniele

Comberiati (2007), Scego stated that what interests her is to analyse what happens to people's bodies when history marks them (Comberiati, 2007, p. 80).^{viii} All of the literary bodies represented in this article are marked by a contemporary, transnational experience, that is, not being able to find a stable, unitary and complete identity, but instead oscillating anxiously between cultures and cultural expressions. In the examples chosen for this analysis, the trans-national experience translates itself into a range of painful bodily expressions, and it is almost like the body becomes something onto which the women can inflict pain and disgust. The characters analysed come from different backgrounds, and they express their pain in different ways, but it may ultimately appear that the painful process is something they must go through in order to accept their multiple and hybrid identities. Some succeed, but not all of the characters we meet in these texts become at peace with their in-betweenness.

As this article shows, Scego's use of vomit and blood, represented through the protagonist of 'Salsicce' and Zuhra in *Oltre Babilonia*, respectively, and semen, fetus and abortion through some of the other narrative strains of this novel, transgresses our sense of cleanliness. I claim that the aesthetic use of the abject emphasises the literary characters' outside position which is, at the same time, shaking pre-established conceptions of Italian culture and identity. They have themselves become objects in the eyes of many of their fellow Italians. The characters also use acts of abjection as a means of dealing with their complex identity; through the pain of abjection, they safely establish themselves as hybrid individuals. However, it is not only through acts of abjection; Scego's literary characters also turn to storytelling and writing as means of healing and support during their identity quest. I will conclude my article on pain and abjection in Scego's literary works by turning to the metanarrative conclusion of *La mia casa è dove sono*.

Already in school, Igiaba, the autofictional protagonist of *La mia casa è dove sono*, finds a solution to some of her identity questioning, via literature and storytelling. In school she feels different, she is bullied and she is an outsider. She becomes mute among her classmates, but through reading books suggested to her by her teacher, she finds her voice and place among her peers again. Then, as an adult, she again finds the answer to her identity quest through storytelling. She has, as we have previously observed, felt like an animal trapped in a cage or like someone lost at a junction, but the process towards accepting her own complex identity starts with the map drawing of the lost and destructed Mogadishu. The act of telling and writing her own and her family's story becomes a healing process during which Igiaba finds a sense of being; but not one that is unitary and fixed, rather, one that consists of shreds and pieces and memories of different places and cultures. When, towards the end of the autofictional novel, Igiaba rhetorically asks herself what it means to her to be Italian, she doesn't give the reader a specific answer; she rather cites the Danish author Karen Blixen:

Then I remembered a story by Karen Blixen [...] I was struck by the title "The Cardinal's First Tale". I remember that a lady asked the Cardinal: "who are you?" The Cardinal replied: "Allow me to answer you in the classic manner, and to tell you a story". [...] It was better to do as the Cardinal: try to tell the story up until then [...] Here I have tried to tell the shreds of my story. Of my paths. Shreds because the memory is selective. Shreds because the memory is like a shattered mirror. We cannot (nor should we) glue together again the pieces. We shouldn't try to make a beautiful copy of it, sort the pieces, clean them of every imperfection. Memory is like a doodle. (Scego 2008, p. 160)

In both *La mia casa è dove sono* and *Oltre Babilonia*, writing and storytelling represent important steps in the healing process and identity quest, and maybe one might apply what Piera Carroli and Vivian Gerrand state regarding *La mia casa è dove sono* to almost all of Scego's fictional works:

By paying homage to the long history of women's suffrage and writing Scego affiliates herself with, and celebrates women's cultural and literary genealogies that trespassed and transgressed all sorts of boundaries to overcome aphasia. The writer also places herself side by side with women still fighting to use their voice—recognizing that this long history of struggle is by no means over. (Carroli & Gerrand 2013, p. 98)

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Notes

ⁱ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines the migrant as 'any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is. IOM concerns itself with migrants and migration-related issues and, in agreement with relevant States, with migrants who are in need of international migration services' (IOM, <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>).

ⁱⁱ The Bossi-Fini law, decree law no. 189, named after the Minister for Devolution and the Deputy Prime Minister, the leaders of the right-wing parties Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale, respectively, at that time, introduced a number of alterations, including one stating that immigrants without residence

permits will be accompanied to the border and expelled immediately after the law is introduced, and another stating that asylum seekers will be placed in detention while awaiting asylum review, and that all foreigners applying for a residence permit will be fingerprinted.

ⁱⁱⁱ All translations from the Italian are the author's if not otherwise indicated.

^{iv} The collection includes short stories by three other migrant female authors writing in Italian (Ingy Mubiayi, Laila Wadia and Gabriella Kuruvilla).

^v In the following I will make page references to the Italian text, but the translation into the English of this short story is carried out by Bellesia and Offredi Poletto and is retrievable at <http://www.warscapes.com/retrospectives/food/sausages> (Bellesia and Offredi Poletto 2005).

^{vi} The novel is structured in eight parts (plus a prologue and an epilogue), each containing a chapter narrated by the novel's five main characters, always in the same order, thus presenting five alternating voices: the two mothers, Miranda, from Argentina, and Maryam, from Somalia, their two daughters, Mar and Zuhra, respectively, and their common, but unknown father, the Somali Elias. The novel's chapters are named after the narrators' nicknames: La Nus-Nus (Mar), meaning 'the half-half' in Arabic, la Negropolitana (Zuhra), la Reaparecida (Miranda) meaning 'the reappeared' in Spanish, la Pessottimista (Myriam), and Il Padre (the Father).

^{vii} Rhoda gets infected with HIV, and moves back to Mogadishu where she dies after being wounded by a rapist gang, but her story doesn't end with her death because her grave is dug up by vandals.

^{viii} [...] quello che a me interessa è piuttosto analizzare cosa succede ai corpi quando la storia li investe' (2007, p. 80).

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