

**KOSI KOMLA-EBRI  
AN AFRICAN VOICE IN ITALIAN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE**

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- As the candidate's Supervisor, I have approved this dissertation for submission.



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## ABSTRACT

The early eighties saw Italy become a landing bay for thousands of immigrants who abandoned their homes in search of a better life. Almost immediately, Italian academics highlighted the importance of this new phenomenon but tended to emphasize the superficial aspects that all immigrants in Italy had in common, aspects linked to the way of life of the newly arrived immigrants which in essence was very different from the Italian way of life. Soon however, the need for the migrants to be heard grew and *La Letteratura della Migrazione* was born. This world-wide literary phenomenon manifested itself at a much later date in Italy, compared to other European countries, largely due to the fact that a cultural tradition imposed by colonialism did not exist. Paradoxically, it is this very lack of colonial history that has given Italian migrant writers the freedom to express themselves in a style of literature that is original and primarily spontaneous and in many ways different to other Italian writers. It is against this background that Kossi Komla-Ebri writes in Italian, the language he embraces by choice.

Although this dissertation focuses initially on the first African migrant writers, it is primarily a detailed study of the characters in Komla-Ebri's novel *Neyla* (2002) and in his collection of short stories *All'incrocio dei sentieri* (2003). In the broader sense, it explores those themes in his narrative common to migrant literature in general, such as the journey, alienation, otherness, loss of identity and the return home. While it is true that these themes represent universal archetypes present in literature since Homer, the study looks predominantly at how Komla-Ebri's thematic exposition differs from other works in the same general categories. The study shows how in exploring and expounding the constant divide between two continents and two cultures, Komla-Ebri succeeds with great compassion and humanity not only to bridge the gap between diverse identities, but also to break away from the African/migrant writer category.

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*A mia madre e mio padre, coraggiosi 'migranti' del dopoguerra a cui devo il grande amore per le mie due terre.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 2004, the consul of Durban, Alessandro Prunas met with me to discuss potential Italian participants for the *The Time of the Writer*, a festival held annually at the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal. It was at this meeting that I was introduced for the first time to the name Kossi Komla-Ebri, a Togolese doctor/writer who had settled in Italy some thirty five years ago. Komla-Ebri graciously accepted the invitation and arrived in Durban armed with gifts. Having dealt with several Italian writers in the past, I was more than a little surprised to encounter a writer who not only was down to earth but also warm and unpretentious. Due to the fact that he is not fluent in English he asked me, during the festival, to read a particularly evocative passage from his novel *Neyla* translated by Pedro Pedroni. The audience, principally the female audience, was so moved by the sensitivity exhibited in his narrative that the next day I was inundated with e-mails requesting copies of the text. Little was I to know that this chance meeting would not only develop into a friendship, but would introduce a literature previously unknown to me, and set me on a journey of self-discovery.

In examining the themes and motifs in the works of the Togolese/Italian writer Kossi Komla-Ebri, this study is also an attempt at defining the importance of African writers in Italian contemporary literature. In doing so, I will also demonstrate the impact that their need to integrate in a culture different to theirs has had on Italy and on Italian literature. However, in order to understand the works of migrant writers the reader must keep in mind not only the unbreakable union between migration and frontier, but also between crossing the border and the eternal longing to be back home. As a result of this, I feel compelled to acknowledge the reasons for which my identity as an Italian-South African living in Africa has not only strongly influenced my chosen area of interest in my dissertation, but as a consequence, also my perspective on Komla-Ebri's narrative.

First, as a daughter of Italian immigrants in the late Fifties, my journey has constantly been dictated to by the power both Africa and Italy have had over me. Born between two cultures and two languages, the constant distance from one or other country has not



only shaped my identity but has brought with it a sense of ‘unbelonging’, a sentiment shared by all migrants and a dominant theme throughout the narrative of Komla-Ebri.

Secondly, the slow and ongoing healing process necessary to stamp out the remnants of the apartheid era has rendered the South African public at large, particularly sensitive to racial and xenophobic incidents. As a result, I have had to acknowledge with certain unease, that xenophobic incidents as blatant as the recent spate witnessed in South Africa during the months of April and May 2008, are equally rife in Italy, as was reported by *Spiegel Online International* on 30/07/2008.<sup>1</sup> Less obvious daily incidents, on a one-to-one basis relating to ordinary people, are subtly explored in Komla-Ebri’s narrative (see my analyses of *Vado a Casa*, *Yevi-il Ragno*, *Due scattole di Fiammiferi*, *Mal di...*)

Thirdly, my claim to *africanità*, notwithstanding my birthright, is challenged continuously in the new South Africa, by the very fact that as a white woman, I no longer fit the ‘African’ profile. 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. (cf. Interview with Komla-Ebri p.38-39) Like the author and many of his characters, I too have found myself in recent months alienated and victim of some form of xenophobia or racism, most noticeably in the workplace (cf. “*La Borsa di Studio*”, “*La Ricchezza del Povero*”, “*Vado a Casa*” in *All’Incrocio dei sentieri*). Ironically, my *Italianità* as with Komla-Ebri’s *africanità*, remains unchallenged, notwithstanding the fact that I have lived in Italy for very short periods of time and he has lived away from Africa for 35 years. In many ways my African reality as a white woman and Komla-Ebri’s Italian reality as a black man do to a certain extent mirror and juxtapose each other in their differences and similarities.

It is precisely this common ground that I share with migrants in general, and specifically with Komla-Ebri, that has influenced not only my choice of dissertation but also my interpretation of his narrative. As a consequence, this dissertation is in many ways also my journey alongside those millions of migrants who like me are caught between two

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to an article published on Spiegel Online International (30/07/2008) that commented on a 20 page report by The Council of Europe, a human rights watchdog that has accused Italy of promoting xenophobia particularly with regard to the Rom (gypsy) and Sinti population. Although the Italian government says that the report is unfounded, opposition parties are in agreement with the Council. Cf. References.

cultures, two countries, two languages, two identities, migrants who in their constant yearning for home no longer know where home is.

The aim of this dissertation is primarily to determine the relevance of Kossi Komla-Ebri's literary contribution and the place he occupies in Italian contemporary literature. In doing so I have taken into account not only his ability to promote an awareness of the existence of diverse cultures within one rooted culture, but also the fact that this awareness is a product of a lived reality and as a consequence is an ongoing process. In this study I have chosen two of Komla-Ebri's narratives, a collection of short stories entitled *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri* (2003) and the novel *Neyla* (2002), both of which, in my view, aptly embody not only recurrent themes that are prevalent in postcolonial literature, such as the journey, unbelonging, identity, the return home and the concept of otherness, but are also representative of the author's particular style of orality. In addition, notwithstanding the fact that Komla-Ebri chooses to write in Italian, the very fact that he was born in Togo, a former French colony, has undeniably governed his choice of themes, be it at a conscious or subconscious level. As a result the dissertation will, with repeated references to the narrative, address issues of identity in colonized subjects, migration and fragmentation through displacement, as well as race relations, hybridity, otherness and unbelonging within a postcolonial framework.

To engage critically with the issues raised above, (issues that are all key-terms in postcolonial theory) the research will draw on the writings of the critics Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, authors of *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*<sup>2</sup>, who give clear cut definitions and accounts of postcolonial theory and discourse. Furthermore, by analysing specific texts taken from the narrative of Komla-Ebri, the study will not only show how the culture of the colonizers impacted on the culture of the colonized, but will demonstrate how the author subtly explores the politics of identity in the zone of 'otherness' among the racially and ethnically marginalized. As this dissertation will be dealing with conditions before and after independence, the unhyphenated form of the word *postcolonial*<sup>3</sup> will be adopted.

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<sup>2</sup> Ashcroft.B, Griffiths.G and Tiffin.H, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. 1988. London and New York. Routledge

<sup>3</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, the authors of *Key Concept in Post-colonial Studies* deal fully with the debate about whether to use the hyphenated or unhyphenated form of the word. It seems that the

In chapter 4, the study will also explore the choice of language used by the author in his narrative and will demonstrate, based on the ideologies of both Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o<sup>4</sup>, how in choosing Italian as his literary medium Komla-Ebri has not only rejected the coloniser's language and culture but has begun the process of becoming decolonised.

The final chapter of the dissertation will consider Komla-Ebri's contribution to Italian contemporary literature outside the realm of migrant literature as well as the significance of his literary input. In an article entitled "Make the Canon: Whose Postcolonial Literature is it?"<sup>5</sup>, Sonia Delgado-Tall<sup>6</sup> maintains that literatures produced by past and present writers of African descent have never truly been acknowledged as self-sufficient literatures, and are viewed as appendages of western literatures in a European context. The dissertation will show that this viewpoint is shared by the Italian literary media and critics alike who tend to marginalize such literatures, but it will also argue that Komla-Ebri's narratives succeed in rising above the constraints of postcolonial concepts and as such is deserving of a space in the centre of Italian literary production.

Finally, I would also like to point out that all translations pertaining to the author's narrative or other were done by myself.<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this study I have chosen to remain as close as possible to the original text in format and style, opting for a literal translation. As this study does not purport to be an exercise in translation, nor do I profess to be a translator, I hope the reader will forgive me if in some instances the translation may appear to be somewhat stilted.

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hyphenated form is synonymous with post-independence. However they are not so clear that the unhyphenated form refers to conditions before *and* after independence. They explain that some writers therefore use the laborious slash form: post-colonialism/postcolonialism to cover themselves.]

<sup>4</sup> Both Achebe, a Nigerian novelist, poet and critic and Ngũgĩ, a Kenyan novelist and critic are renowned for their views and ideologies regarding the use of the language of the colonizer.

<sup>5</sup> <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/pocpwi6/27> accessed 09/02/2009.

<sup>6</sup> Delgado-Tall is assistant professor of African and African-American literature at Roosevelt University, Chicago.

<sup>7</sup> The writer acknowledges that the novel *Neyla* has been translated by Peter. N. Pedroni in 2004 and is available through Fairleigh Dickenson University Press.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **An overview of the history of migration to Italy in the twentieth century and an introduction to the first migrant writers from Africa.**

Unlike England, France, Spain and Portugal, Italy was never a dominant colonial power, and during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries while Europe was at the peak of its colonial expansion, Italy was supplying an impressive amount of emigrants all over the world. It is for this reason that one cannot strictly speak of postcolonial issues or postcolonial theories or post-colonial literature<sup>8</sup> with regard to Italy in the same vein that one does about France and England. Furthermore, in the fifties and sixties, Italy saw a huge influx of Italians migrating from the impoverished south to the industrial north of Italy in search of employment and a better life<sup>9</sup>. The concept of migration therefore, is not new to Italy but its reaction to migrants of non-Italian descent flocking into the peninsula in the last three decades is unparalleled in Italian migrant history.

From the seventies onward the emigration trend was reversed when there was an influx of migration from North Africa, Asia and Eastern-Europe. Analysis of data of the past 35 years shows that the majority of migrants came from developing countries, specifically from North Africa.<sup>10</sup> The seventies saw migrants arriving in small numbers mainly from ex-Italian colonies like Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia, and while the eighties saw an increase in immigration from Morocco, Senegal and the Philippines, it was in the nineties that migration in Italy became complex and multiple with migrants arriving en masse, mainly as a result of armed conflict and poverty from the eastern bloc, China, South America and the Sub-Saharan continent.

It is safe to say that unlike in Britain, where Indians and Pakistanis are the dominant group, and France, where the Maghrebines overshadow other migrant groups, in Italy, one group of migrants does not prevail over another. Peruvians, Bolivians, Chinese,

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<sup>8</sup> Attempts at coming up with a single definition for postcolonial literature and theory have proved to be controversial, but generally the literature concerns countries that were once colonies and is written by authors from ex-colonized countries.

<sup>9</sup> *Il Fenomeno Dell'Emigrazione: Europa e Nord Italia (dal 1950 ad oggi) "Il Meridione ed il Miracolo Economico"* G.Talomo, [digilander.libero.it/acquariodivibo/eventi/festa\\_emigrati\\_2008](http://digilander.libero.it/acquariodivibo/eventi/festa_emigrati_2008).

<sup>10</sup> Information obtained from *IL Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2007: study conducted by the Catholic Organisation CARITAS/Migrantes on immigration*. <http://www.Sociologia.Tesionline.it/sociologia/articoli> by Andrea Villa

Malaysians, Somalis, all live together to form the kaleidoscope that is the migrant population. This complex and colorful sea of people in which one group does not tower over another, spills over into all social and cultural spheres including literature.

Due to the late start of migration in Italy, compared to other European countries, the world-wide phenomenon of *La Letteratura della Migrazione* manifested itself at a much later date, yet it is impossible to say precisely when this literary movement was born. Generally, there is the belief amongst critics<sup>11</sup> that it was triggered as a result of the untimely death of Jerry Essan Masslo, a young black South African who had fled his country to escape the laws of apartheid. Masslo was one of the 3000 migrants who had entered Italy with the aid of Amnesty International in the late eighties. However, as waves of immigrants from less developed nations landed on Italian soil, irrational social responses prevailed and the peninsula found itself confronting issues previously unchallenged. At the core of this problem was the issue of racism.

In August 1989, Masslo was shot to death by a gang of white youths in the southern region of Caserta. As a result of this unprecedented death, Italy, which after the fall of Mussolini had prided itself in its democracy, launching uncompromising attacks against apartheid, found itself face to face with racial intolerance. The public, assisted by the media, took to the streets in protest against the attack. National TV channels carried out debates on racism and the plight of the *clandestini*.<sup>12</sup> Masslo's funeral, attended by politicians and dignitaries, was broadcast live to the nation. The national debate provoked by the murder was such that a reform in immigration came to be considered pivotal in combating racism.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, in January 1990 the 'Martelli' law<sup>14</sup> came

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<sup>11</sup> This point was raised by the migrant writer Igiaba Scego, at the third annual convention of *Eks&tra Scrittori Migranti* 2004. It is also mentioned by Armando Gnisci in *La Letteratura della Migrazione*, Lilit, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Illegal immigrants

<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding the intolerant reaction displayed by Italians according to a study by the Centre against Racism and Xenophobia in Vienna (2005), Italy has emerged as the most tolerant European country with regard to the immigration phenomenon

into effect. The law was an attempt to control and monitor immigration, and thus to pave the way for the institution of a quota system.

### **1.1 The first African migrant writers. A background study of Migrant Italian writers from Africa in *La Letteratura della Migrazione*: The pioneers: Mohamed Bochane, Salah Methnani and Pap Kouma.**

The death of Jerry Masslo impacted on migrants, and the need to be heard became significant. Up until that moment the migrants, whether because of their lack of knowledge of the Italian language or because of their social standing in the community, were regarded as the 'voiceless', and even though there had been a publication of poetry by the Cameroon Ndjock Ngana (also known as Teodoro) entitled *Foglie vive calpestate. Riflessioni sotto il baobab* (Roma, UCSEI, 1988), it had been largely ignored by the public and the critics.

The first voice to be heard in reaction to Masslo's death was the famous French-Moroccan poet Tahar Ben Jelloun,<sup>15</sup> who wrote an essay on the episode entitled "Villa Litterno" in the book *Dove lo Stato non c'è. Racconti italiani*, co-authored with the Italian journalist Egi Volterrani in 1990. However, it was the publication of three novels: *Io, Venditore di Elefanti* (1990), by the Senegalese Pap Kouma; *Immigrato* (1990), by the Tunisian Salah Methnani; and *Chiamatemi Ali* (1991) by the Moroccan Mohamed Bochane that gave the *Letteratura della Migrazione* an official 'migrant' literary voice.

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<sup>14</sup> The Martelli law was instituted by the Deputy Prime Minister, Claudio Martelli, and stipulated that any immigrant, legal or illegal, who could prove that he or she had come into the country before the end of 1989 would be granted a two year residency permit

<sup>15</sup> Tahar Ben Jelloun is a Moroccan poet and writer who has lived in France since 1971. His works have received many awards including the *Prix Goncourt* and the *International Impac Dublin Award*. He is also an active participant in the various seminars and conferences held regarding migrant literature in Italy

Apart from the obvious fact that all three authors hail from ex-French colonies, there are two main points of commonality with regard to the three novels. The first is that all three novels are primarily biographical recounts of the trials and tribulations experienced by the migrant writers in their journey to a new country. The second point which I will explore on p.12, relates to the language issue, specifically the fact that all three are co-authored with the assistance of an Italian writer.

This literature is above all an attempt to denounce to the world the racism and alienation encountered, and the suffering associated with it. *Io venditore di elefanti* [I hawker of elephants] (1990), written by the Senagalese Pap Kouma in conjunction with the Italian journalist Oreste Pivetta, is representative of this earliest phase of Italian migrant literature. The novel is a cry from the pit of despair, a hopelessness that stems from life in Africa and the need to flee in order to survive. As the title suggests, it tells the story of a hawker who like many others, leaves his motherland in order to survive:

*L’Africa è governata male. Troppi profittatori. Puoi anche studiare e lavorare ma non cambia niente, perché chi comanda non è disposto a concederti un po’ del suo spazio. Così la gente se ne deve andare. Ha speranza solo se fugge, se riesce a raggiungere l’Europa ... Per questo non si può tornare: se torni vai solo ad aggiungerti ai tanti che vivono del lavoro dei pochi. Devo rimanere in Europa.(p. 17)<sup>16</sup>.*

He goes on to say “*Voglio partire per liberarmi di questa appiccicosa miseria. Voglio partire per tornare ricco.*” (p. 24) [I must leave to rid myself of this misery that clings to me. I must leave so that I can return a rich man.]

Ironically, not only does misery continue to hound the impoverished hawker when he reaches Italy, but it is now coupled with racial intolerance and xenophobia largely due to the discriminatory attitude of a people and a country which is struggling to come to terms with the very same prejudices that it readily denounced from afar. However, despite the endless encounters with the forces of the law, and the difficulty with the

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<sup>16</sup> [Africa is badly governed, too many profiteers, you can study and work but it won't change a thing, because those who are in control are not prepared to concede you even an inch of their space. So the people must go away. You only have hope if you run away and succeed in reaching Europe... You cannot go back. If you do you will simply be part of the many who live off the work of few...I must remain in Europe]

language, the writer, like many of his compatriots, refuses to make France his home, because:

*Odio la Francia perché ci ha colonizzati e sfruttati. Sento anch'io l'orgoglio di chi per la prima volta alza la testa. Sento la rabbia per quanto i miei fratelli hanno sofferto. In Francia non sarei rimasto*<sup>17</sup>. (p. 45)

Consequently, the novel also becomes a platform for the writer to express, on behalf of thousands of voiceless migrants, his resentment and anger to the oppressors of his colonial past. Italy in spite of its prejudices and discrimination becomes more appealing and therefore more tolerable, and the writer accepts that Italy is struggling to change and is striving in spite of many contradictions, to regard men and women of other nations, religions and cultures as equal citizens.

The second novel, *Immigrato*, written by the Tunisian Salah Methnani and the Italian Mario Fortunato in 1990, tells the story of a young privileged Tunisian who with a degree in languages decides to leave his country to pursue his dream of being part of a rich and cultured western world. At a seminar on *Migrant Literature* in Ravenna in 1992, Methnani offered the following insight:

*Sono partito da Tunisi cinque anni fa, con una laurea in tasca e una borsa piena di libri più che di vestiti, senza sapere se quel giorno stavo partendo come un emigrante nord-africano o come un qualsiasi ragazzo che vuole conoscere il mondo.*<sup>18</sup>

However, unemployed and ostracized, the protagonist soon finds himself part of the world of prostitution, drugs, poverty and prejudice. The dream of the Europe studied in his scholarly books transforms into a nightmare and he comes to terms with his own new identity, that of a black man in a white man's country.

*Vogliono parlare con te, ma cercano di cambiare il tuo nome dal suono impronunciabile [...] prima che mi affibbino un nome italiano passo al contrattacco: se proprio non riuscite a*

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<sup>17</sup> [I hate France, because it colonized and exploited us. I feel the same pride as he who holds his head up high for the first time. I feel anger for what my brothers suffered. In France I would not have remained].

<sup>18</sup> [I left Tunisia 5 years ago with a degree in my pocket and a suitcase with more books in it than clothes, yet I didn't know if I was leaving as a North-African migrant or as a young man who wants to discover the world]



*chiamarmi Mohamed, allora chiamatemi Ali*<sup>19</sup>  
(p.19)

From this opening statement the same themes of intolerance and degradation are developed in the novel *Chiamatemi Ali* [Call me Ali] by the Moroccan Mohamed Bochane, published in 1991. What is different in this simple yet touching diary is the strong Islamic faith that helps the protagonist Mohammed to overcome the indignation and humiliation suffered at the hands of the Italian people during his first years in Milan as a struggling migrant. This same faith enables him only seldom to judge those who discriminated against him because of his race and culture.

## **1.2. Saidou Moussa Ba and *La Promessa di Hamadi*, the ground-breaking novel that exposes the migrants struggle and their need to integrate with Italian society.**

It is clear why *La Promessa di Hamadi* [Hamadi' s Promise] written *a quattro mani*<sup>20</sup> by P.A Micheletti, a Milanese author and Saidou Moussa Ba, a migrant from Dakar, was such a groundbreaking novel when it was first published in January 1991. It differs from the other three novels in two major ways. First, it is not biographical in content and the characters and the content are totally fictitious. Secondly, unlike the first three novels, it is not aimed at the general public but is didactic and informative in content, aimed specifically at school children in the '*terza media*' [eight and ninth grade]. While the plot is realistic in that it deals with problems relative to migrants in Italy during the nineties (such as: difficulties in not having a permit, humiliations suffered by the migrants due to their illegal status, continuous encounters with the police, difficulties in finding shelter, it also deals with the Senegalese as a people, their cultures and their customs.

*La Promessa di Hamadi* recounts the story of Semba, a young Senegalese who embarks on a journey from Dakar in search of his elder brother Hamadi. Hamadi had left for Italy in a last bid to survive the desperation and poverty that his family and his people were accustomed to. "*In Europa*" he believed "*c'è lavoro, c'è ricchezza, la gente vive bene*" (p.8) [there is work, there is wealth, everybody lives well]. However, Semba,

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<sup>19</sup>[They want to speak to you, but they try to change your name because to their ears it is unpronounceable [...] before they slap an Italian name on to me let me counter attack: if you really can't call me Mohamed then call me Ali]

<sup>20</sup> Literally means with four hands ie.co-authored

although younger, was a lot wiser than his brother, wiser because he knew from his books that slavery and colonialism were “*I regali che l’Africa aveva ricevuto dalla ricca Europa*” (p.22) [the gifts that Africa had received from wealthy Europe]. With the permission of the ancestors and the blessing of the town *griot*<sup>21</sup>, the boy leaves and so begins a treacherous journey through Italy.

Semba finds himself initially working as a tomato picker in the south of Italy where, because of his illegal migrant status, he is exploited by the ‘caporali.’<sup>22</sup> It is not coincidental that this is the same town where Jerry Masslo was murdered as many migrants flocked to the areas of Caserta during the harvest. His search takes him across Italy and finally to Milan where he is sucked into the crime-ridden, drug- infested life of the ‘*clandestino*’.

Not only does *la Promessa di Hamadi* explore the birth of a multiethnic and multicultural society in Italy, but it does so in an informative way by allowing school children to experience at first hand the problems faced by the child sitting next to them on the school bench. For the first time in the history of migrants in Italy, their plight is taught in a fictional way in the classroom, but the message brought home is that one must go beyond appearances and acknowledge that migrants are human beings. By exploring the suffering of Semba in leaving his family behind, Moussa Ba draws the reader closer to his people and reveals a nation made up of loving families that anxiously await the return of their wandering sons and daughters. These are people with similar values to Italians, people who love and experience pain just like any human being. Above all, the author uncovers a people with a different culture and identity who need to be respected and not disregarded. In testimony the novel introduces the importance of African culture to Africans, such as their unwavering belief in amulets, *griots* and witchdoctors, which are an integral part of their very existence.

*La Promessa di Hamadi* also denounces the reaction of Italy when faced with the influx of the *immigranti*. In doing so it highlights the fact that Italy, a democratic country, still bearing the scars of a fascist regime that had left the country impoverished and forced

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<sup>21</sup> The *griot* is an important figure in African culture and represents the keeper of history and traditions.

<sup>22</sup> Slang for a person who exploits illegal immigrants

many of its people to immigrate in search of a better life, was now confronted with a similar situation in its own land. Saidou Moussa Ba's novel pointed a strong finger at Italy, which with its socialist and liberal government, had in the seventies and eighties taken a firm stand against apartheid, but was now in the nineties, guilty of xenophobia, ethnocentricity and the very racism that the country had so vehemently protested against.

### **1.3 The need to be heard - The language issue.**

This first phase of migrant literature is thus known as *Letteratura della Testimonianza*. All four novels highlight not only unconcealed racism on the part of Italy, but show a country that is indifferent and for the large part does not listen.

"*Gli italiani non sanno prestare ascolto*" [Italians don't know how to listen] writes Methani, and Ben Jelloun adds:

*In questo paese la gente non sa ascoltare. A tutti piace parlare, ma non rispondono mai alle domande che gli si fa, perché dimenticano di stare a sentire.*<sup>23</sup>

The need for the early migrant writers to be heard clashed with the difficulty to express themselves in a language that was still foreign to them and this concern results in the second common factor that binds the four novels i.e. the language issue. All four novels are written *a quattro mani* i.e. the writers are 'assisted' by an Italian journalist or writer, and as a result the Italian that ensues is flowing and classic as well as grammatically and idiomatically faultless. What appear to be one-dimensional recounts are in fact literary works that reflect a historical period. The author's intention is to act as a voice for the voiceless and to relate discriminatory episodes experienced by the main characters and illegal migrants in Europe in general. Unfortunately the 'assisting writers' do not succeed in transferring the essence of African culture and folklore in their rendition of the journeys, and perhaps it was never their intention to do so. Ultimately, all four novels relate the journey of an African as dictated by an African but the words in the novel remain those of an Italian. *La Letteratura della Testimonianza* was exactly that - a testimony to the suffering experienced by migrants in their journeys out of Africa.

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<sup>23</sup> Gnisci, A.1998. *La Letteratura Italiana della Migrazione*. Roma: Edizione Lilit 1998, pp.35-36 [In this country people don't know how to listen. They all like to talk, but they never answer the questions that we ask them, because they forget to stop to listen.]

It was however thanks to these first four novels written between 1990 -1992 that migrant literature was now accessible to the Italian public even if through the words of Italian writers. Although these novels enjoyed a fair amount of success, the *furor* caused by 'something new' eventually died down and influential publishing houses no longer expressed an interest in the writings of the migrants. This delicate moment in the history of migrant literature pointed towards its inevitable death, yet this very crisis became a turning point as *La Letteratura della Migrazione* found a new and original way to express itself.

The biggest change was brought about by the authors themselves who were no longer reliant on co-authors. From 1995 onwards, migrant writers allowed themselves the freedom to express themselves in Italian in spite of the potential grammatical and idiomatic errors. The writers no longer felt confined within linguistic restrictions but rather saw themselves as vehicles for cultural changes. This was an opportunity to bring a breath of fresh air to a somewhat stagnating literature. As a result the Italian that emerges is refreshing, spontaneous and unrestricted by grammatical and structural barriers.

In his paper on Italian migrant literature (*Eks&Tra Convention*, 2004), Serge Vanvolsem<sup>24</sup> maintains that migrant writers in the first phase express a unified voice of suffering. It is a cry to expose the impoverished conditions of the countries from which the emigrants come, and from which they are forced to escape. Distance gives the writers a deep awareness of the problems, but it is an awareness that is different from the one they had before leaving:

*Lo scrittore migrante, quando arriva, respira ancora il vento della propria infanzia, vede l'Italia con i suoni del suo paese di origine, sente con i colori del cielo che ha lasciato*<sup>25</sup>

Vanvolsem believes that the migrant author writes primarily about his distant memories and so a nostalgic literature is created. However, in the second phase of this literature signaled by several years in Italy and with a certain firsthand knowledge of the

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<sup>24</sup> Professor of Linguistics (Italian) University of Leuven, Belgium

<sup>25</sup> [when the migrant writer arrives he is still breathing the wind of his own childhood, he sees Italy with the sounds of his motherland, he feels it with the colours of the sky that he left behind]

language, the migrant writer has acquired a critical standpoint towards the host country and as a result the themes he engages with change. The author now will not write only about his recent experiences but also about Italy with its contradictions and its people.

Always present in the literature of Italian migrant writers is the feeling of nostalgic regret, that is inevitably linked to a sense of 'unbelonging', a feeling that will persist even upon the migrant's return home. This feeling can be best defined through the word *saudade* widely used in Portuguese literature. It is the intense desire for something that is absent either because it is lost or because it can never be reached.

To assist the migrant writers in establishing themselves as writers, the first online journal *El Ghibli* was born in May 2002. *El Ghibli* which means "wind of the desert" and in itself acts as a metaphor of a new wind blowing over Europe from Africa, was founded by Gabriella Ghermandi, an Ital-Ethiopian writer, born in Addis Abeba but now resident in Italy. The online journal is a platform for all foreign writers who live in Italy and want the Italian public to hear their voices. The migrant writers see their personal journeys and literature as a movement (both physical and literary) that creates not only transformation, but also an awareness of what is new and different outside and within the writer. As Saidou Moussa Ba said at the 2003 *Forum Eks&Tra* in Mantova:

*La letteratura può essere un valido strumento interculturale, perchè può favorire la conoscenza reciproca...Questo forum vuole testimoniare la ricchezza di questa letteratura che è nuova e trasversale...Questi immigrati stanno rivendicando una cosa importante: il diritto alla parola. Quando si parla di intercultura, nel mio modo di pensare, vuol dire raccontarci, ascoltarci, o più semplicemente, contaminarci.<sup>26</sup>*

Literary prizes aimed specifically at migrant writers are awarded annually by *Eks&tra* and journals like *El Ghibli* and magazines like *Nigrizia*, *Terre di Mezzo* and *Tam-Tam* dedicate their editions primarily to the works of migrant writers. The phenomenon of

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<sup>26</sup> [Literature can be seen as a valuable intercultural tool, because it can foster reciprocal awareness ... This forum bears testimony to the richness of this literature that is both new and transversal... The migrant writers are asking for the right to the word, because when one talks of interculture, in my opinion, one must mean talking to each other, listening to each other, or more simply contaminating each other].

migrant literature is moving forward, yet studies carried out on this literature are few and confined to Australia and America.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, there is a perception amongst Italian academics and in Italian literary circles generally that this type of literature is inferior to 'authentic' Italian literature. Departments of Italian studies in Italy fail to acknowledge it and students remain ignorant of its existence. In fact Gnisci is quite adamant that "*la letteratura italiana della migrazione non interessa i critici e gli studiosi italiani.*"<sup>28</sup> [Italian migrant literature does not interest Italian scholars and Italian scholars] The subject matter of this literature is researched by studies that are not directly linked to literature, such as sociology, anthropology and intercultural pedagogy. The most interested participant remains Armando Gnisci from La Sapienza University in Rome whose specific field of interest is Comparative Literature.

Ironically, Italian migrant literature is more researched abroad than in the country of its origin. As Igiaba Scego<sup>29</sup> recounted in her paper at the *Eks&Tra* Convention 2004, it is more often than not people like herself, children of immigrants, who feel the need to explore this literature because it is a mirror reflection of their own life and that of their immigrant forefathers.

According to Igiaba Scego (*Eks&Tra* Convention) Italy has a literary outlook that struggles to take these writers seriously, and as Paolo Di Stefano pointed out in '*Il Corriere della Sera* (19 July 2003), the belief exists amongst Italian academics, Gnisci included, that Italy has yet to produce a Ben Jelloun and a Mahfuz<sup>30</sup> two migrant writers who have enriched French literature with their novels.

My personal experience in Italy in September 2006 verified this view, and when I questioned bookstore owners about the availability of such books, either they had never

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<sup>27</sup> According to Armando Gnisci (*La Letteratura Italiana della Migrazione*) academics and researchers, like Graziella Parati, Laura Ruberto and Pedro Pedroni live out of Italy.

<sup>28</sup> Gnisci, A. 1998. *La Letteratura Italiana della Migrazione*. Roma: Edizione Lilit. 1998: p.49

<sup>29</sup> Igiaba Scego was born in Rome, but her parents are from Somalia. In 2003 she won the *Eks&Tra* prize for migrant literature.

<sup>30</sup> Naghib Mahfuz was born in Cairo and is the first Arab writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature.

heard of these authors or I was directed to the shelves where books of foreign African writers translated from their original language into Italian by Italian journalists/writers are kept. Generally very little interest was shown with regard to these writers. In twenty bookstores that I visited in Turin, Milan, Rimini and Bologna, none of the books in question was on the shelves; one bookstore alone offered to track down some of the books but with very little success. Interestingly enough, almost in defiance of the disregard shown them, African vendors outside these same bookstores, often approached me, selling the very books I was in search of.

It is in this literary and social climate that my study on the narrative of Kossi Komla-Ebri begins.

#### **1.4 Kossi Komla–Ebri: an introduction to the man, the author and the significance of Italian as the medium of communication in his narrative**

Kossi Amékwoyoa Komla-Ebri was born in 1954 in Tsévié in the former French colony of Togo, the first male in a family of twelve siblings. His parents, devout Catholics, were both teachers and worked for the Catholic mission station, a profession that was badly paid, and as Komla –Ebri said, sometimes not paid at all; in fact they often worked '*per la gloria di Dio*'<sup>31</sup> ( for the glory of God). In 1965, at a very young age and thanks to a bursary, he left his hometown and headed for France where he completed his studies at the *Collège Saint Esprit* in Beauvais. He then moved to Paris in the hope of finding a job which would see him through financially and allow him to enroll in the Faculty of Medicine.

Life in the *Quartier Barbès* where he lived with other migrants was not what he expected, and to survive he was forced to take on menial and humiliating jobs. In Paris, notwithstanding his French citizenship, he endured tremendous hardship, discrimination and poverty which not only did not allow him to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor, but by his own admission were decisive factors in influencing his choice of Italian in his narrative (cf. online interview with author pp.20-22). A chance encounter on the Métro with the Archbishop of Togo changed his life: the Archbishop, upon hearing his story

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<sup>31</sup> cf. online interview with Komla-Ebri p.86

organized a bursary for him to continue his studies at the international college *Villa San Giacomo* in Bologna. He later went on to study Medicine and Surgery at the University of Bologna. After his degree he moved to Milan where he specialized in General Surgery. Today he works in the Pathology Laboratory at the *Fatebenefratelli* hospital in Erba (Como) where he lives with his wife and two children.

Komla-Ebri explained to me during one of his visits to South Africa that he is both a doctor who writes and a writer who practices medicine, as both professions are akin to his spirit, complementing and existing harmoniously together. In 2002 he published an illustrated manual entitled "*Afrique: La santé en images*",<sup>32</sup> which was distributed free across various African countries with the specific aim of encouraging health education amongst different African populations. In 1997, "*al duttur*",<sup>33</sup> as he is affectionately known by his elderly patients, won first prize in the annual literary competition for migrant writers organized by *Eks&tra* with his collection of short stories "*Quando attraverserò il fiume*", and then went on to publish numerous short stories and novels that are listed in my bibliography.

Komla-Ebri has participated in various conferences and festivals including *The Time of the Writer* in Durban, South Africa in 2005, where my association with him, as his official translator, began. He has also published numerous papers and articles, one of which "*Anch'io sono Italia*"<sup>34</sup> (I am also Italy), was published in the German journal *Die Brücke* in July /August 2000 edition. Komla-Ebri also serves on the editorial committee of the online journal *El Ghibli*.

Notwithstanding his achievements both as a doctor and a writer, Komla-Ebri has never forgotten his African roots and as a spokesperson for Africans living abroad, dedicates his free time to schools and hospitals as an intercultural mediator. His objective is to highlight to ordinary people the problems faced by migrants in their bid to be integrated and be part of an intercultural community. In April 2000 his contribution and

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<sup>32</sup> Co-authored with Aldo Lo Curto, published by Rotaray Club, Lugano Lago and the Rotary Foundation.

<sup>33</sup> The doctor" in Milanese dialect

<sup>34</sup> "*Auch ich bin Italien*" Di Brücke-Forum für antirassistische politik und kultur N.4/X1X. Julie- August 2000



perseverance in the field of communication and dialogue across cultures was recognized and he was honoured with the “*Microcosmo d’Oro*”<sup>35</sup> award.

Komla-Ebri has to date published a number of novels and short stories yet very few are available in major bookstores. It seemed appropriate to ask the author on my visit to Italy in September 2006, whether there is a resistance to this type of literature on the part of publishing houses. Komla-Ebri confirmed that Italy is without a doubt struggling to accept this type of literature and the reason he believes is twofold: first, the influx of ‘*clandestini*’ (illegal immigrants) into Italy from their starving and often war-torn countries has brought with it a fair number of problems. Crime and drug peddling are on the increase and daily media reports of rapes, drugs and theft point fingers at the ‘*clandestini*’. This has resulted in a general air of mistrust that is not completely unfounded. Unfortunately this attitude of distrust has impacted negatively on all aspects of migrant society and culture in Italy, literature included. Moreover, for the majority of African ‘*clandestini*’, taking to the streets to sell their wares, is not only a means of survival but also a way of life. As a result the *vu cumprà*<sup>36</sup> are generally regarded as a nuisance to a country that is not accustomed to the African way of life or to their ways of trading.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly, Komla-Ebri explained that although Italy’s lack of a colonial past (if compared to France and England) has had a positive effect on the literary freedom of francophone migrant writers who have settled there, other issues have arisen. Of most concern is the fact that this same lack of colonial past has exposed a nation that lacks experience in dealing with colonized people. The Italian public, unlike the French and the English, have not yet been sensitized to reading novels written in their language by writers and individuals with a vision and culture different from their own. This has not only led to further resistance towards migrant literature but also

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<sup>35</sup> An award given annually by the region of Lombardia to three persons of foreign origins who have distinguished themselves for their contribution in the field of intercultural communication

<sup>36</sup> Derogatory term used to describe illegal traders in Italy. From the Italian “vuole comprare”, which means ‘would you like to buy’. Definition of ‘*vu cumprà*’ ‘*volete comprare*’ ...’. “...it is a deformation of ‘would you like to buy’ and it also implies that we immigrants are not even capable of stringing together two words correctly in the language of the country that so kindly hosts us...’ (pg. 66)”...nowadays the whites use it disarmingly and throw it at us as if it were our real name, our qualification.’ Translated from *La Promessa di Hamadi* p.66.

heightened the perception that it is an inferior art, and as such does not warrant significant attention. Indeed this has been proved by the very fact that it is not studied as a form of literature in Italian universities. This attitude suggests that, although Italy openly condemns xenophobia and racism, it is to a certain extent guilty of not recognizing that a migrant can also be an intellectual.

I spoke to Komla-Ebri about the vendors who are selling the books of African migrant writers on the streets and asked if this method was not in some way discrediting both the literature and the author. He explained that, although the writers had out of necessity put their books on the streets as is the case in other countries in Europe, this type of trading is by no means an undignified form of employment in Africa, and as such also provides an honest and respectable income for the vendors who take to the streets. Moreover, even if this type of activity is regarded as the *vu cumprà* of literature, the street distribution has been very successful. Komla-Ebri confirmed that 40,000 copies of his novel *Neyla* alone had been sold in this way, and admitted that he most probably would not have sold that amount had they been distributed in various bookstores.

Komla-Ebri also pointed out that migrant writers are perceived by the Italian literary 'academia' as foreign writers who translate directly from their own language into Italian (no matter how long they have been in the country) and based on this assumption, cannot be considered Italian writers in their 'purist' form. Moreover, the Italian used by the migrant writers, with all its expressions, nuances, grammar and *oralità*, is not regarded as enhancing the language but rather is seen as a corruption or distortion of the *lingua viva*. Documents that substantiate these views are not easy to come by mainly because such a perception would not be considered politically correct. However, the very fact that the literature of migrant writers is not easily available in Italian bookstores and is more accessible on foreign shores, bears testimony to this.

In order to establish the importance of the use of Italian as a medium in the writings of Komla-Ebri and to understand the reason for which he chooses to write in Italian, I e-mailed the author certain questions that I believe were crucial in understanding the language issue. The following is a transcript of his responses received on 28/11/2007. For the purpose of easy reference I have chosen not to use footnotes in the translations.

**FB**<sup>37</sup>. *“Scrivi racconti nella tua madre lingua (per madre lingua intendo la lingua dei tuoi antenati, non si chiama togolese vero?) e se la risposta è positiva che cosa scrivi?”*

[Do you write novels in your mother tongue (by mother tongue I mean the language of your forefathers, which is not known as Togoese, correct?) and if you do, what kind of genre?]

**KKE**.<sup>38</sup> *“La mia lingua madre si chiama Ewe (che abbiamo in comune con popolazioni del Ghana). Purtroppo ai miei tempi non veniva insegnata nelle scuole quindi ne ho solo una conoscenza orale. La forma scritta ho cercato da solo di impararla così riesco con fatica a “decifrarla” ma non sono in grado di scriverlo e tanto meno in forma letteraria.”*

[My mother tongue is called Ewe (it is a language that we share in common with the people of Ghana). Unfortunately when I was young it was not taught at school and as a result I only have an oral knowledge of this language. I tried to teach myself the written form and I manage with great difficulty to decipher it, but I am definitely not in a position to write it especially in a literary form. ]

**FB**. *“Lo so che scrivi anche in francese, ma cosa? Ricordo che mi avevi parlato di un documento medico in francese o qualcosa simile, quindi anche qui che genere?”*

[I am aware that you also write in French, but what? I remember you telling me about a medical journal or something similar, what do you write? ]

**KKE**. *“In francese ho scritto, con il collega Aldo Locurto, la versione francese di “Afrique-La Santé en images” un manuale di salute per l'educazione sanitaria delle popolazioni che è stato poi tradotto in inglese e viene distribuito gratuitamente su tutto il continente. Di letteratura ho al mio attivo solo un racconto “Le huitième péché” (L'ottavo peccato: Del Rap Hip hop) per l'omonimo (sic) antologia delle Editions Ndzé 2006 (Francia). Questa antologia è nata da un “Call for paper” per scrittori africani a cura di Kangni Alem sul tema dei 7 vizi capitali. E ovviamente ho scelto...l'ottavo!”*

[Together with Aldo Locurto I co-authored a manual on health education in French entitled “Afrique–La Santé en images”, which has been translated into English and distributed all over the African continent. As far as short stories are concerned I have only written one entitled “Le huitième péché” (The Eighth Sin: Del Rap Hip hop) for an anthology with the same name, Edition Ndzé2006, (France). This anthology was created as a result of a call for papers from African writers by Kangni Alem on the theme of the seven capital sins. Naturally I chose the eighth one! ]

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<sup>37</sup> Federica Bellusci

<sup>38</sup> Kossi Komla-Ebri

**FB.** *“Se usi specificamente l'italiano per i tuoi racconti letterari, perché hai scelto l'italiano e non il francese che in fondo e' una lingua con la quale ti trovi piu' a tuo agio.”*  
[If French is the language with which you are most comfortable, why then have you specifically chosen to write your novels and short stories in Italian?]

**KKE.** *“Ho scelto ormai più specificamente l'italiano rispetto al francese per tre motivi essenziali:*

*a) ho iniziato a scrivere in "italiano" spinto da un forte bisogno di "comunicare", di urlare, rivendicare innanzitutto la mia esistenza e la mia essenza in questa società per dire "ci sono" che non sono solo una "mano d'opera" che ho pensieri, sogni, sentimenti. Di fronte alla totale "ignoranza" (nel senso etimologico) nel confronto della mia cultura, scrivere in italiano significa aprire una finestra sugli usi e costumi della mia terra. Quindi volendo comunicare con gli italiani la strada più breve non poteva essere che nella loro lingua. Una scelta di lingua come "percorso" alla conoscenza.*

*b) ho scelto e continuo a scrivere in "italiano" perché ormai per me è la lingua del quotidiano, di una integrazione desiderata e scelta, è la lingua del mio vivere e sognare: è la lingua dell'amore.*

*c) 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 d'immaginario e non ('ho' omitted by author) rancore nei suoi confronti come potrei averlo anche inconsciamente con quella "francese" che è e rimane la lingua dei colonizzatori che ci volevano civilizzare fino al midollo spinale!”*

[I have chosen Italian rather than French for three main reasons.

a) I began to write in Italian because I felt the strong urge to “communicate”, to scream, to justify above all my existence and the very essence of who I am in this society, it was the urge to say “I’m here” and I am not just a “worker”, to let people know that I have dreams, thoughts and feelings. When confronted with the total ‘ignorance’ (etymologically speaking) with regard to my culture, writing in Italian meant opening a window on the customs and traditions of my land. So, if I wanted to communicate with Italians the shortest route was obviously in their language. I saw this language as a ‘journey’ to knowledge and awareness.

b) I chose and I continue to write in Italian because for me it is the language of everyday life, it is the language of the integration that I looked for and chose, it is the language of how I live and dream: it is the language of love.

c) I chose to write in this language because it is a language that I love, because of how it sounds, its rhythm and its melody. For me the Italian language fills me with imagination and I bear it no grudge, a grudge that I probably would have for the French language

even if at a subconscious level because it remains the language of the colonizers who wanted to civilize us to the bone!]

**FB.** *“Che cosa rappresentano queste tre lingue per te?”*

[What do these three languages represent to you?]

**KKE.** *“Oggi, mi ritengo un uomo d'identità plurima e mosaica crocevia di culture lingue e linguaggi.*

*La mia lingua materna (l'Ewe) rimane quella della nostalgia, dei ricordi, delle credenze, dei suoni, sapori e profumi: la lingua del cordone ombelicale.*

*La lingua francese rappresenta quella degli studi, della mente: la lingua della ragione, quella imposta.*

*L'italiano è prima di tutto la lingua del quotidiano, del comunicare, della scrittura ma anche quella dell'amore e della passione perché è una lingua scelta.”*

[Today I consider myself a person with multiple identities with a mosaic of cultures and languages.

My mother tongue Ewe is the language of nostalgia, memories, beliefs, sounds, tastes and perfumes: it is the language of my umbilical cord.

The French language represents the language of my education, of my mind, the language of reason, the language that was forced onto me.

Italian is first and foremost my everyday language, the one I communicate in, the one I write in, but also the language of love and passion because it is the language that I chose.]

This chapter has sought to introduce Italian migrant literature and has considered briefly only those first Italophone writers who have consciously thematised and problematised the plight of the migrant within their texts. In doing so, it has attempted to give the reader an understanding of the social and literary climate in Italy, which ultimately forms the background to the narrative of Komla-Ebri. Lastly, this chapter has endeavoured, through the words of the author, to explain the need to write in a language different from the language of the oppressor, a need motivated not only by the urge to communicate, but also by the desire to open doors to the identities and diversities of other cultures.

## CHAPTER 2

### The African Migrant – the ‘other’ in the narrative of Komla-Ebri

What is it about otherness that threatens us so? Why do we feel we have to make others be just like us in order to feel completely comfortable with them? For centuries the policy of dominant societies to marginalize and ostracize those different remained unquestioned. The awareness that respect and tolerance for the diverse culture of a human being is a fundamental right is still in its early stages and this Eurocentric practice is still rife in modern society. The disheartening fact is that while many of us will never have to deal with marginalization, many more are subjected to it their entire life. It is difficult enough making friends in a strange country, but what can a person do when others actively seek to exclude one? How does a person cope when people go out of their way to keep one marginalized? It is well documented that migrants are easy targets of socio-political and economic restructuring as well as violence, and because they are often seen as economic and cultural burdens and threats, they are perfect candidates for victims and scapegoats.

In his book *La réclusion solitaire*, translated with the title *Le pareti della solitudine*, (Volterrani, Einaudi, 1990), Tahar Ben Jelloun describes the migrant in the following way:

*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 villeggiatura. Per loro il viaggio è la valigia legata con lo 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 lavoro e i suoi modi*

*maldestri, spaesati, quelli di uno che ha l'aria di scusarsi in continuazione. (p.VIII)*<sup>39</sup>

Compounded further by the fact that these journeys are brought about by conditions beyond a person's control, and that the impact with foreign countries is such that *'le speranze soffocano nelle delusioni, nella nostalgia, nella disperata ricerca di uno spazio in cui sentirsi individuo, diritto fondamentale dell'uomo'*<sup>40</sup> [hope is suffocated in disappointments, in nostalgia, in the desperate search for a space in which to feel like an individual, fundamental right of every man], Ben Jelloun's description of the migrant offers little hope for any form of integration or acceptance by the host country. The focus of my study in this chapter is precisely this concept of otherness. A concept so prevalent in migrant literature that together with marginalization and identity, forms a key factor in the narrative of Komla-Ebri.

## **2.1 Marginalization, identity and otherness: A study of 'Vado a Casa', 'Mal di...', and 'Yevi-il-Ragno' from *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*.**

Cara Africa mia, mi spiace lasciarti  
Anche se non hai fatto niente per trattenermi  
Sto lasciando amaramente tutte le tue meraviglie  
Per andare dai bianchi  
Cara Africa mia, proteggimi e spero nell'aiuto  
Di Dio per riuscire a fare qualcosa di buono  
E tornare da te, perché non vado per rimanerci  
Dio mio, proteggimi sempre, sempre  
Cara Africa mia, mi spiace lasciarti...<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> [Those who have no other wealth other than their ethnic and cultural difference are consecrated only to a life of humiliation and every perceivable form of racism. They are also troublesome. Their presence is one too many. The journey for them will never be for a holiday. For them the journey is a suitcase tied with a string, packets with food and a fistful of earth or mint from their homeland in a handkerchief. They cover their face with mud when everything goes wrong and nostalgia becomes the only source of refuge, the only consolation. The migrant is an aberration of modern times. A mistake of our era. A smudge in history. He has nothing else to sell other than his strength to work and his clumsy, disorientated ways, of one who is continuously apologizing]. Cited in Ramberti, A & Sangiorgi, R. 1999. *Parole oltre i Confini*. Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Ramberti, A & Sangiorgi, R. 1999. *Parole oltre i Confini*. Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore

<sup>41</sup> Zagbla, T. 1998. *Il Grido dell'Alternativo. Esperienze di immigrato ivoriano*. Torino:, Edizioni dell'Arco, Einaudi:, p. 29

[My beloved Africa, I'm sorry to have to leave you  
Even if you have done nothing to make me stay  
I leave your marvels with great bitterness  
and go to the white people  
My beloved Africa, protect me and may God help me  
So that I may succeed in doing something good  
And return to you one day, because I am not leaving never to return  
My God protect me always, always  
My beloved Africa I'm sorry to have to leave you...]

In this way Tano Zagbla, an immigrant from the Ivory Coast sings of the anguish of leaving one's motherland and the inevitable nostalgia that seizes the heart of each migrant. However, nothing can prepare migrants for the reception that they will receive upon their arrival. Initially, they may well fail to see the indifference of the host country as they are so bewildered and overwhelmed by their new condition. Consequently, to help ward off the emptiness and nostalgia, migrants all over the world recreate with mementos and keepsakes the faraway or lost "home", clinging to anything that is reminiscent of their past. As time passes, they will realize that the emptiness they feel has everything to do with their 'otherness' and they will go about adapting their identity to fit the host country's profile.

In an interview<sup>42</sup> with Achille Rossi, Komla-Ebri stated that

*La prima reazione dell'immigrato è quella della paura, che lo porta subito a cercare persone che provengono dalla sua zona [...] In questa maniera gli immigrati vivono in Italia ma stanno con la testa in Africa. Non sono in osmosi con la società<sup>43</sup>.*

Accordingly, the migrants form family or social networks and look for compatriots in order to recreate their ethnic communities. They embrace whatever takes them back home and can lessen the pain, prioritizing first and foremost the common language factor and then social and ethnic traditions. These will take the form of specific décor, music, foods, and any other visual, auditory or olfactory stimuli that will lessen the distance from their motherland.

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<sup>42</sup>L'altrapaginaonline: *Troppi Pregiudizi*. October 2006 <http://www.altrapagina.it/ingrandimento/articolo.php>.

<sup>43</sup> [The first reaction of migrants is that of fear and this forces them to immediately look for people who come from their area... In this way they live in Italy but their head is in Africa. They are not in osmosis with society].



When Fofó's sister<sup>44</sup> in Komla-Ebri's short story "Mal di..." in *All Incrocio dei Sentieri*, arrives in Italy from a rural village somewhere in Africa, she is overwhelmed by cultural traditions that are markedly disconnected from her own way of life. Disorientated and unable to understand the language, she is further taken aback when her own brother refuses to assist her, preferring to rattle off what she is not to do while she is a 'guest' in the home that he shares with his white wife. The list of do nots, quoted below, indicates a stereotypical perception of African behaviour, and is suggestive of a new identity that Fofó is creating for himself in order to fit the Italian profile. The one person she thought she could depend on uncovers a part of himself previously unknown to her, and it does not take her long to discover that he is ashamed of her *Africanism* as it is a reminder of a self he can no longer be comfortable with:

*...Subito mi raccomandò di tenere la mia stanza in ordine, di usare le 'pattine' quando entravo in salotto, di non fare la doccia tutti i giorni perché 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 e cottura, e che soprattutto impregnavano la casa per giorni con la scia degli aromi dei condimenti (la 'puzza'). p.10<sup>45</sup>*

Her inability to be integrated and to interact in a culture poles apart from hers results in her being ostracized, and her attempt at hanging on to her identity which is her only tool for survival, is thwarted by her own relative. Ironically, Fofó does this so that he can retain the new identity he has created in order to make himself more acceptable and credible in Italian society.

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<sup>44</sup> As is customary in African culture many of Komla-Ebri's principal characters do not have a name. This is also evident in 'Quando attraverserò il fiume' where the main character is known simply by the name 'il figlio di Fofóé'.

<sup>45</sup> He immediately told me to keep my bedroom tidy and to use felt-pads when I entered the lounge, not to shower every day because the central heating was expensive, not to leave the lights on the stairs and in the bathroom, not to spend three hours doing the ironing, not to speak in our language and to keep the volume down when listening to that 'singsong' African music. Included in this sacred Decalogue was the prohibition to cook foods that required hours and that would impregnate the house for days with the 'stink' of the condiments].

In this seemingly insignificant incident that is cloaked in lightheartedness and humour,<sup>46</sup> Komla-Ebri casually and cleverly introduces the concepts of marginalization and the need to create a new identity in order to be accepted in the host country. Readers will observe that the author's use of wit and humour as a vehicle to expound racial and xenophobic incidents acts as a buffer on what would under normal circumstances be considered controversial. Although Komla-Ebri has stated that he considers personal racial slurs and incidents to be "un bagaglio umano provato" [human baggage that has been tested], and that unlike Pap Khouma who wrote his novel in "*un momento di rabbia intensa*"<sup>47</sup> [a moment of intense anger], he has overcome the resentment not only emotionally but also psychologically, his narrative suggests that his journey as a black man in a white continent has impacted tremendously on his philosophy of life.<sup>48</sup>

In the short story "*Vado a Casa*" Komla-Ebri paints a picture of a society of *smarginati* [the marginalized], and in doing so points strongly to France and the mass media that ostracize not only the migrants and prostitutes, but also gays, handicapped and delinquents placing them all "*nello stesso recinto, ai confini del perbenismo*" (p.20) [in the same box, on the edge of respectability]. There is no doubt that the main character 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 profile required by Parisians

Therefore the awkward truth uncovered by Komla-Ebri is not surprising because both Fofu's sister in "*Mal di...*" and Yao in "*Vado a Casa*" in *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri* are migrants, and are perceived as the other, an 'otherness' distinguished by identifiable traits such as race, ethnicity, social standing and above all the colour of their skin. As migrants they will face discrimination and xenophobic hostility which will result in their

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<sup>46</sup>Readers may question where the humour is in my translated version of the above. In the Italian version the author has succeeded in capturing the pedantic and obsessive nature of Northern Italian families who are governed by rules and conditions imposed upon them by apartment buildings as well as by il '*perbenismo*' ie. 'respectability' required by society. Rules, which in African society are not only irrelevant but also considered absurd. The use of the 'pattine' is but one example of this excessive behaviour. Alternatively, the author does not spare African culture his sharp wit when he describes how upon her arrival in Rome, the protagonist did not know that she had to slip underneath the blankets in order to cover herself and consequently slept freezing on top of the bed. (p.10)

<sup>47</sup> In an interview with Pedro Pedroni (Miami University)  
<http://www.kossi-komlaebri.net/intervista.pedroni.php>

<sup>48</sup> Cf. online interview with Komla-Ebri pp. 38-39.

being marginalized and vulnerable to all sorts of abuse. In “*Mal di ...*,” the main character is teased and mocked by her nephews when she reprimands them in her language “*Li sgridai nella mia lingua, perché mi era più facile e loro scoppiarono a ridere, scimmiettando letteralmente il mio ‘parlare africano’ con ‘Abuga, bongo bongo!’* ”. (p. 11) [I shouted at them in my language because it was easier for me but they burst out laughing and began aping me with words like ‘Abuga, bongo, bongo!'] In “*Vado a Casa*”, when forced to beg for money Yao is confronted with statements like “*Fanullone di un negro, vai a lavorare, o meglio, perché non te ne torni a casa tua?*” (p.24) [Lazy black, go and work, or better still why don’t you go back home?]

Due to the fact that African migrants originate from multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual countries, they are already from the outset a people with multiple identities. However, in Europe and specifically Italy, my own experience, showed that a strong distinction is made between those who claim to be Italian and those who do not have this self-proclaimed title. Italy, unlike South Africa, does not consider itself a state built on a multiplicity of identities, but rather on one identity, the Italian/Catholic identity. It follows then that interaction and integration with these multi-ethnic African cultures is restricted and inclined to be somewhat one-sided. Rather than interacting and integrating with these various multi-ethnic groups and identities, the tendency is to marginalize them until such time as they have been ‘Italianized’ as much as possible, but even that is no guarantee of assimilation. As Renzo Guolo, a sociologist and Islamist at the University of Padova said:

*Non abbiamo mai pensato agli immigrati come a persone che sarebbero state qui a vivere per il futuro...Semplicemente non sappiamo come costruire una società di diversi gruppi etnici.*<sup>49</sup>

Marginalization and identity in terms of migrants are closely linked and are in a natural sequence in relation to each other. Marginalization brings with it not only the dilemma of social dislocation, which in most cases is influenced by the colour of the migrant, but also the problem of cultural and historical dislocation. In his paper on Afro-German

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<sup>49</sup>,Cited in “*A casa in Italia, ma ancora emarginati*. Elizabeth Rosenthal 06.04.2006. <http://www.eddyburg.it/articleview/5503/0/218> [we have never conceived of the migrants as people who in the future would stay here and live ...Quite simply , we don’t know how to build a society made up of different ethnic groups.]

cultural dislocation, Molefi Kete Asante<sup>50</sup> states that cultural dislocation occurs when people live their lives on someone else's terms rather than on their own. Coupled with historical dislocation, a phenomenon that forces people to live outside of the influence of their own intellectual traditions, preferring rather to "live on the fringes of the experiences of others"<sup>51</sup>, cultural dislocation further serves to divide and fragment the already fragile identity of the migrant. Fofu in "Mal di..." is a prime example. Not only is he a victim of this type of dislocation but he is also now guilty of perpetrating it with his own sister.

Asante further suggests that in the German mind, to be African and to be German, is not to be German. This concept is not restricted only to Germans but as Komla-Ebri states it also applies to African-Italians residing in Italy<sup>52</sup>. The question is not whether this principle is applied specifically to Africans 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.

Interestingly, in an interview with Fabio Fazzi<sup>53</sup>, Nadine Gordimer stated that in South Africa to be considered 'African' one had to earn the right. Birth did not automatically qualify one as being 'African' and in order to earn the right, one had to have taken part in the struggle in some way. Although she did not qualify this, my experience as a South African by birth suggests that in post-apartheid this applies specifically to whites. In the preface (p.3) I pointed out that one of the reasons in choosing the narrative of Komla-Ebri was this specific commonality i.e. my not fitting the African profile and his not fitting the Italian profile. In fact, many of Komla-Ebri's characters<sup>54</sup> are constantly forced to question their identities in their host countries and others still like Yawo in the novel *Neyla* and Fofu's sister in "Mal di..." are also forced to do so upon their return home. To a large extent this mirrors the ongoing dilemma of white South Africans residing in South Africa.

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<sup>51</sup> Asante, M. K. *Afro-Germans and the Problems of Cultural Location*. Selected scholarly papers published by Backintime History of the U.S Colour line, OneDropRule.org

<sup>52</sup> Cf. my interview with Komla-Ebri p.39

<sup>53</sup> Gordimer was interviewed in April 2008 on the programme "Che tempo fa?" Rai TV

<sup>54</sup> Fofu in "Mal di...", Yao in "Vado a casa", Yevi in "Yevi il Ragno", Yao in "La Manif",

As already stated, closely linked to the concept of marginalization, is the question of identity and more specifically, the loss of it. At a conference on migration at Ravenna in 1992<sup>55</sup> Salah Methnani stated:

*La partenza è segnata in un primo luogo dall'assenza, dal non essere e dall'annullamento della propria persona; un annullamento che si percuote inevitabilmente più tardi nel paese ospitante*<sup>56</sup>

Hence, the characters in Komla-Ebri's novels and short stories tend to 'Europeanize' themselves as much as possible, adopting western attire and attitudes which will enable them to fit in more easily and to adhere to the norm. Yawo in the novel *Neyla* dresses and speaks like a white man (p.9), Neyla, due to her mannerisms is mistaken by the protagonist as having lived in Paris (p.12), Fofu in "*Mal di...*" no longer mixes with his own people because it would make him appear less European. (p.14) Yao, in "*Vado a Casa*" even takes on the French name Eric in order to facilitate the new identity process. (p.20)

The name-changing phenomenon was prevalent also in South Africa during the apartheid era when many black people replaced their African names with English and Afrikaans names in order to be more acceptable to the whites. For blacks of that era whose identity had been dehumanized by the regime, taking on 'white' names meant to a certain degree regaining a type of identity. Consequently names like Beauty, Blessing, Happiness, Precious and Princess were on the increase. To a lesser degree, Italian immigrants who settled in South Africa in the fifties and sixties tended also to anglicize their names i.e Piero became Peter, Giovanni became Joe, Massimo became Max etc. Faced with the same sense of 'non-being' and self-annulment that Methnani referred to, there was and still is the perception that by assuming the identity of the 'other' one can integrate more easily.

In "*Mal di...*" the main character's brother Fofu is a prime example of an individual who is going through the various processes of a changing identity. Ashamed to be related to his sister, as she is a reminder of the African in him, he is constantly on the look out for

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<sup>55</sup> The paper is archived by [www.El.Ghibli.org](http://www.El.Ghibli.org). Anno 3. Numero 14 dicembre 2006

<sup>56</sup> [Leaving is defined in the first instance by an absence, by a non-being and by the annulment of one's own self, an act that comes back later to torment one in the host country].

her 'faux pas', which would embarrass him in his new identity. "*Era diventato come un bianco: freddo ed indifferente alla sua gente, come se si vergognasse delle sue origini*" (p.14) [he had become like a white man, cold and indifferent to his people, as if he were ashamed of his roots]. However, Fofò's attitude to his sister suggests that although his attempts at suppressing his identity have succeeded in his becoming dislocated on the outside, on the inside his former identity is still very much alive and struggling to survive.

*Mio fratello venne a trovarmi di nascosto dalla moglie. Lì da me ritrovavo il Fofò che avevo sempre conosciuto, parlavamo nella 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... (p. 13)<sup>57</sup>*

As Methnani observed, and as is evident with Fofò in "*Mal di...*", the 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 are processes that 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 Fofò visits his sister secretly in order to indulge in some of his African practices. It simply 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.

Migrant writers at a conference held in Siena in February 2006<sup>58</sup>, agreed in unison 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 abnegating and denying their origins, and no longer emulating the identity of the ethnic

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<sup>57</sup> [My brother would come and visit me without his wife's knowledge. There at my place, I would find the Fofò, that I had always known, I would prepare him our spicy food which he would eat greedily with his hands, then he would crack the bone with his teeth and suck greedily on the marrow making a dreadful noise].

<sup>58</sup> Forum Internazionale della Letteratura della Migrazione "*Reinventare l'italiano: Scrittura e migrazione*".Siena, feb 2006. (cf. references)

group that hosts 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:

*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. I nostri incontri erano le uniche occasioni per sfoggiare i miei boubou sgargianti. (pp.13-14)<sup>59</sup>*

An essential part of intercultural interaction is the realization that contact with someone who is from another country does not impoverish one's own identity but if anything, strengthens it. Contact with the 'other' is in fact what allows one to define and enrich one's own identity, a concept with which I will deal in the short story "*Due Scatole di Fiammiferi*". (pp. 51-52)

However, the whole process will start again and can be equally traumatic when the migrants return home. On their return they will have to deal once more with the question of identity and the realization that they are no longer who they were when they embarked on their initial journey. "*Non si ritorna mai – spiega Vladimir Jankélévitch<sup>60</sup> – colui che ritorna, come il figlio prodigo e come Ulisse, è già un altro*". [We never return – explains Vladimir Jankélévitch – he who returns, like the prodigal son and Ulysses is already another.]

In the short story "*Mal di ...*" Fofó's sister realizes a week after her return to her hometown somewhere in Africa that she can no longer live in her native village where there is no running water or electricity, nor does she have much in common with the friends she had left behind "*Non riuscivo più ad intavolare una conversazione decente con le amiche di un tempo*" (p.15) [I was no longer able to hold a decent conversation with my old friends]. This depiction of her unease is in strong contrast with the picture

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<sup>59</sup> [And so I took to once again greeting the Africans I met on the streets. Some would come and visit me because I was fortunate enough to have my own apartment [...] where we could stay together and plait each others hair, listen to music without disturbing anyone and speak loudly. These get together were also the only times I could show off my flashy *boubou* (kaftans)].

<sup>60</sup> French philosopher as quoted by Filippo Rossi *Quando la nostalgia è postmoderna*. Ideazione 3.2003, May, June (cf. references)

the reader had of her on her arrival in Rome when, confused and disorientated, she did not understand the purpose of bed sheets:

*La prima notte fu infernale, la passai in un albergo prenotato a Roma da mio fratello: coricata sul letto come usavo fare sulla stuoia nella mia capanna, ero mezzo assiderata, non sapendo che bisognava infilarsi dentro le lenzuola.(p.10)<sup>61</sup>*

Back home, she now feels the strong need to live in an environment that is “*ordinato e tranquillo*” (p. 15) [organized and tranquil] and finally settles in the city where she goes about recreating bits of Italy:

*[...] a volte andiamo [...] a divorare una pizza “Da Silvia”, per concludere la serata a vedere qualche bel film con Mastroianni e Sofia Loren. Oppure ce ne stiamo a casa a vedere le foto di quando ero a casa ‘mia’ in Italia, ad ascoltare le canzoni del festival di Sanremo, di Baglioni, Ramazzotti o Zucchero (p16)<sup>62</sup>*

The author shows here that she is attempting to reconcile herself with her new identity, and can only do this by absorbing parts of both cultures.

The character Yao, in the short story “*Vado A Casa*”, is a universal figure, emblematic of African migrants who walk the streets of Europe in search of a better life, but he is also in many ways the spokesperson for Komla-Ebri in the first phase of his journey. He is also a typical example of how one’s identity is defined by others’ perception of it. And in Europe, in this particular case France, Yao, by virtue of the colour of his skin and his social status, is at the mercy of xenophobic behaviour. As the author’s voice, Yao bears testimony to the injustices meted out to African migrants in Europe in general, and Komla-Ebri successfully steers Yao’s behaviour in various directions which, while being extremely comical, is ultimately indicative of a society caught in the throes of racial intolerance. By choosing to write fiction instead of a biographical account like Pap Kouma, Komla-Ebri allows himself the freedom to observe objectively. This is

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<sup>61</sup> [The first night was a nightmare, I spent it in a hotel that my brother had booked for me in Rome: lying on the bed like I used to do on the straw mat in my hut, I was half numb with cold not knowing that I was meant to get in between the sheets.]

<sup>62</sup> [{...} at times we go {...} to devour a pizza at ‘Da Silvia’, to end the evening we go and see a good movie with Mastroianni and Sofia Loren. Or else we stay at home and look at the photos of when I was at ‘my’ home in Italy, or we listen to songs from the Sanremo Festival, Baglioni, Ramazzotti or Zucchero.]



significant because it simultaneously permits the character Yao to make judgments on his behalf.

Yao then, not only is representative of migrants in the first phase of their journey, but his experiences are closely linked to personal episodes recounted by Komla-Ebri in various interviews. Like the author, Yao is a French citizen who leaves his native African village to try to make a better life for himself in France. Like Komla-Ebri he encounters endless problems primarily because of his migrant status and the colour of his skin.

In an interview with Pedro Pedroni<sup>63</sup> when asked to recount his experiences as a prospective student struggling to pay for his studies at medical school, Komla-Ebri had this to say: *“In Francia ho cercato di lavorare, ma dormivamo gelati in dieci sul divano i piedi sulle sedie in case non riscaldate...”* [I tried to work in France, but we would sleep ten of us, on sofas, frozen stiff, our feet on chairs, in homes with no heating] He refers directly to this episode in *“Vado A Casa”* where Yao recounts his pitiful experience in Paris: *“A Parigi aveva provato di tutto: dal dormire in dieci in una stanza gelida...dove in cinque si stava seduti con piedi appoggiati sulle sedie”* (p.22) [He had tried everything in Paris. He had slept with ten others in a freezing room...where five of them would sleep seated. Legs leaning on chairs...] In the same interview, Komla-Ebri further recounts an episode where, hungry and with no money, not only was he forced to rummage through dustbins in the hope of finding food, but he would pick up cigarette butts from the pavement. This is echoed almost verbatim in *“Vado a Casa”*:

*Si, signori, se ne andava a casa: non avrebbe 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 ricattare cicche. (p. 22)<sup>64</sup>*

Although Komla-Ebri emphasises in the interview with Pedroni that he has with time overcome humiliating episodes such as these, his referral to them in the short story

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<sup>63</sup> [www.kossi-komlaebri.net](http://www.kossi-komlaebri.net) *Interviste e riflessioni* 26 June 1999.

<sup>64</sup> [Yes Sir, he was going home: he would no longer have to rummage through crates at the back of entrances of supermarkets to appease his hunger, nor would he ever crouch down in the underground pretending to tie his shoelaces when in fact he was picking up cigarette stubs.]

“*Vado A Casa*” and his publication of *Imbarazzismi*<sup>65</sup> not only suggest otherwise, but are a constant and grim reminder of what African migrants are forced to confront on a daily basis.

Incidences as recounted above serve to highlight that inherently linked to the theme of the journey in the narrative of Komla-Ebri, are the twin concepts of ‘otherness’ and ‘unbelonging’. The inability to fit in because of one’s ‘otherness’, is explored in many of Komla-Ebri’s short stories but it is in the simplicity of “*Yévi- il-ragno*”, a western fable in the form of an African narrative, that the author succeeds in calling attention to these concepts.

In this particular short story the author plays the part of the village *griot* and recounts the tale of Yévi, the black spider, who is forced to leave his village in search of food for his community. Not long into his journey he soon finds that in the new land he is ostracized and alienated because he is seen as a *straniero* [foreigner]. Offended and intolerant of his customs, the people of the new land punish him by sending him to work the fields behind the king’s palace. Sensing the nostalgia and loneliness that “*corrossero il suo cuore*” (p. 63) [were corroding his heart] a beautiful bird begins to sing to ease his pain and the melody reaches the windows of the king’s daughter, curing her of her insomnia. Grateful, she asks who has cured her of her malady as she wishes to marry him. However, Yévi is not allowed into the palace because “*I mendicanti, i delinquenti e gli stranieri non sono ammessi!*” (p. 64) [Beggars, delinquents and foreigners are not allowed!]. Fortunately as in all fables, help is at hand and by some form of magic Yévi is transformed into a handsome young man. Once inside he asks the princess to close her eyes while the bird sings. Unfortunately, when she reopens them she is confronted with the spider and the bird. Recognizing him for who he really is, she agrees to marry him, much to the dismay of the others who question not so much his integrity but his profile. “*Ma non è uno di noi! ... È un ragno, per di più è piccolo e poi ...è nero!*”(p.64) [But he isn’t one of us! ... He is a spider, moreover he is small and then ...he is black!] Once again, a *Deus ex machine*, in the form of the king comes to the rescue and in his

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<sup>65</sup> Published in 2002, *Imbarazzismi* is a collection of anecdotes illustrating latent and unintentional racism in Italy.

wisdom gives his blessing. The princess and the black spider live happily ever after and have '*tanti discendenti*' (p.65) [lots of descendants].

Komla-Ebri has effectively succeeded in this short story not only to recount a western legend by making use of an African narrative form, but to also mix with characteristic light humour, the modern with the new. The use of humour in Komla-Ebri's narrative is by no means accidental. This literary device, even more evident in '*Vado a Casa*', is effective in that it can lessen the burden of the stereotypical image of '*l'altro*' [the other] as illustrated in the attitudes of others. According to Komla-Ebri, irony and laughter are effective antidotes because "*la risata accende luce nel buio*".<sup>66</sup> [laughter brings light to darkness] and by revealing cultural arrogance and ignorance, it can create cultural awareness.

If the aim of Komla-Ebri's narrative is to be fictitious, but at the same time to build a bridge between two diverse cultures, it is with subtle references to '*l'altro*' [the other], ever present in his novels and short stories, that he succeeds. The following extracts from *All'Incrocio Dei Sentieri* and *Neyla*, which refer to '*l'altro*' suggest the need for a social awareness of a condition that is eating away at the heart of Italian society "*Non riconoscevo più mio fratello*" (p.10)... "*era diventato come un bianco*" (p. 14). [I couldn't recognize my brother.... He had become white] is the picture Fofu's sister has of her brother in "*Mal di...*", "*Figlia mia...mi sa che sei diventata come loro*" (p.41) [my daughter... it seems to me you are becoming just like them] is Francesca's mother's comment in "*Due scatole di fiammiferi*", when her daughter takes on one of her husband's customs. "*Vai a casa tua!*" (p.24) [Go back to your home!], says the passer-by to Yao in "*Vado a casa*", when approached for money so that he can go home., "*Straniero, Tu meriti la morte*" (p. 63) [Foreigner, you deserve to die] say the members of the assembly to Yévi il ragno in "*Yevi-il-ragno*" when he greets them in the manner that is customary in his land. "*Sei come loro...*" (p. 19) [You are just like them...] is Neyla's reaction to Yawo when she fears that he will exploit her and then leave her.

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<sup>66</sup> Bertelli, A. October 2002. *La Banalità del Razzismo*: [www.CasadiCultura.it](http://www.CasadiCultura.it)

Komla-Ebri<sup>67</sup> believes that the European media's portrayal of Africa and its diverse cultures is extremely negative and not representative of the whole continent. Footages portraying children with swollen bellies, famine, corrupt governments and uneducated, uncivilised people are the order of the day. Cultural practices like voodoo and ancestral rites are ridiculed and discredited. Few Italians remember who Gbéhanzin<sup>68</sup>, Shaka Zulu<sup>69</sup>, Amilcar Cabral<sup>70</sup> and Patrice Lumumba<sup>71</sup> were. Few have seen or will see films by African directors such as Sembene Ousmane,<sup>72</sup> Idrissa Ouedraogo<sup>73</sup> or Cheik Omar Sissoko<sup>74</sup>. It is precisely in perceiving Africa as *'l'altra'* [the other] and as a consequence, different and therefore inferior to the *'io/noi'* [I/we], that a spectrum of attitudes that range from paternalism to downright racism is generated.

Paola Tabet, a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Calabria carried out research on obsession and fear of *'l'altro'* and interviewed a cross-section of children throughout Italy. One of the questions asked was *'Che cosa farei se i miei genitori fossero neri'* [What would I do if my parents were black]. The answers given ranged from *'li terrei come schiavi'* [I would keep them as slaves] to *'avrei paura per sempre'* [I would be afraid forever] to *'proverei a dipingerli con un colore chiaro come rosa e almeno diventerebbero di pelle italiana'*<sup>75</sup> [I would try to paint them a light colour like pink so that they would at least have Italian-looking skin]. The sentiments expressed by the children not only substantiate Komla-Ebri's view but also clearly reflect a situation that creates a great deal of anxiety and signal how a series of stereotypes and racial prejudices are encouraged at an early age.

In her book *I figli di Dante*<sup>76</sup>, Giuseppina Commare states that xenophobic and judgemental attitudes with regard to the other are overlooked in situations where

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<sup>67</sup> These views were expressed by the author in an article he wrote in November 1999, entitled *Decostruire l'Immaginario*, [www.golemindispensabile.it](http://www.golemindispensabile.it)

<sup>68</sup> King of Danhome advocated the peaceful coexistence of peoples and interregional dialogue among cultures.

<sup>69</sup> Military genius, founder and king of the Zulu nation

<sup>70</sup> Engineer, writer and nationalist politician who led Guinea- Bissau's independence movement

<sup>71</sup> African anti-colonial leader and first legally elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo.

<sup>72</sup> Senagalese film director considered by many "The father of African film".

<sup>73</sup> Well known film director from Burkina Faso

<sup>74</sup> Malian director and politician

<sup>75</sup> Paola Tabet published the answers in *La Pelle Giusta*: Torino, Einaudi 1997.

<sup>76</sup> Edizioni c.u.e.c.m. (Cooperativa Universitaria Editrice Catanese di Magistero) Catania 2006. capitolo 111 – Sulla letteratura migrante italoфона " Il Re è Nudo ...? Il dottore è nero!"pp. 107-116

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 colore cui si vorrebbe solo insegnare*”<sup>77</sup> [learn from those whom one wanted only to teach], and with change comes tolerance and acceptance. In view of this assumption one would think , that the primary difference between the character Yao / Komla–Ebri of thirty years ago, and the Komla-Ebri of today is an education, more specifically an education in medicine, especially since Commare suggests that a medical doctor would enjoy a higher social ranking regardless of his/her colour. There is no doubt people’s perception of Komla-Ebri changed when he became a surgeon and he has often noticed how “*il mio camice bianco è uno scudo protettore: in qualche modo mi rende più...bianco.*”<sup>78</sup> [my white coat is like a protective shield: in some way it makes me more...white]. However, an e-mail he sent me in April 2008 strongly suggests that this only occurs where his status is well known.

In response to my question<sup>79</sup> on what defines a persons’ *italianità* specifically in Italy, an embittered Komla-Ebri, still reeling from the results of the recent elections, which saw Berlusconi and his right wing party return to power<sup>80</sup>, had this to say:

*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 a Vasco Rossi. Ho letto da Dante, Calvino, Moravia a Erri De Luca. Parlo e scrivo discretamente la lingua italiana e ne mastico alcuni dialetti. Mia moglie è italiana, i miei figli sono italiani, ho avuto la cittadinanza italiana, ho mangiato tanti di quei spaghetti, tortellini e tagliatelle da essere italiano ad honorem senza disdegnare la polenta con la cazzeula e tanto meno le orecchiette con le cime di rape. Ho bevuto dal Barbera al Montepulciano passando dal Barbaresco al Pino grigio, onorando il Chianti. Mi sono sorbito come tutti le crisi di governo che si sono susseguite in questi anni, gli scioperi, le code, i ritardi dei treni, i Festival di Sanremo e ho tifato*

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<sup>77</sup> Commare,G. “I figli Africani di Dante” Cap 111

<sup>78</sup>Bertello, A. Ottobre 2002. *La Banalità del Razzismo*. [www.CasadellaCultura](http://www.CasadellaCultura). Accessed July 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Online interview with Komla Ebri Tuesday, April 15 2008.

<sup>80</sup> Il Popolo della Libertà (PdL) one of the main concerns of this party is to deal with the problem of illegal immigrants.

*appassionatamente per gli azzurri" a tutti i mondiali. E dopo 34 anni, 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 quel che non siamo.<sup>81</sup>*

It is clear from Komla-Ebri's response that, notwithstanding the Italian government's fervent stand against racism and xenophobia, this same stand has yet to be successfully implemented on the streets. Negative perceptions of otherness instilled by stereotypical and media propaganda linger on. Ultimately, a person is judged not on what he or she is or does, but rather on what he or she appears to be, and in most cases the colour of one's skin is the deciding factor. By continuing to perceive the migrant as the other, negative responses will not only persist but will grow and fester. It is only by teaching and upholding tolerance and respect for diversity both in schools and in homes that this problem can be overcome.

## **2.2 Neyla, Africa and the other: Exploring the extent to which the character Neyla in the novel *Neyla* is fundamental in unravelling the identity crisis in Yawo.**

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<sup>81</sup> [I have lived in Italy for 34 years, I studied and I graduated in Bologna. In these years I have relished the genius of Raffaello, Da Vinci and Modigliano. I have listened to Italian music, from Verdi, Vivaldi, Rossini and Vasco Rossi. I have read Dante, Calvino, Moravia and Erri De Luca. I write and speak Italian reasonably well and I even have a smattering of dialects. My wife is Italian and my children are Italian, I have Italian citizenship, I have eaten so much spaghetti, tortellini and tagliatelle as to deserve being made an honorary Italian, without ever turning down polenta with a ladle and orecchiette with turnip tops. I have drunk Barbera and Montepulciano as well Barbaresco and Pino, and paid honour to Chianti. Like everyone I have put up with the government crises that have taken place during these years, the strikes, the queues, delays in trains, the Sanremo Festivals and I have passionately supported the "azzurri" in all the world cups. And after 34 years I go out on the road and a 14 year old kid sees me and say "extracomunitario".

Where are my rights as a citizen? Where is my Italianità? He is 14, I have lived here 34 years. I pay my taxes and despite everything I have even saved a couple of lives. He simply made the effort of being born in Italy; or better still his mother made the effort of having him born in Italy. And yet, because of his birthright his blood, his rights to this land, or better still his 'colour of the skin' he tells me that I am not an Italian citizen, I am that species of a Martian that is the "extracomunitario": that swear word that continues to define us by what we are not.]

Although I have dealt briefly on p.33 with the question of identity encountered by migrants upon returning home, it is in the novel *Neyla* that Komla-Ebri explores in depth and with great sensitivity the crisis brought about by the loss of identity and the perception of 'otherness' common to all those who leave and then return.

In his preface the author modestly describes the novel as the story of a love affair with the heroine Neyla, but also with Africa, "*Neyla è Africa e Africa è Neyla*" [Neyla is Africa and Africa is Neyla], but that would be too simplistic as the novel is much more than that. *Neyla* is primarily about 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.

In *Neyla*, the main character Yawo, undertakes a homecoming from Italy to his family and friends somewhere in Africa.<sup>82</sup> Almost immediately after his return, he encounters Neyla, sitting behind a reception desk where she works for his brother Basile. He is instantly struck by her beauty and by her "*sguardo pungente, sfrontato*" [sharp, brazen gaze] and "*quel tuo parlare francese con cadenza metropolitana*" (p.9) [that way you spoke French with a metropolitan accent] which are in strong contrast with the submissive and cautious, social attitudes generally displayed by African women in Africa. It is not surprising that Yawo's attraction to Neyla is governed by the fact that she is so European in her looks and mannerisms, as after years in Europe his perception of women has been altered. Back home, his new, European approach to women indicates that he would experience a certain amount of difficulty in forming any sort of relationship with the local village girls. This is clearly evident in the following passage where his aunts attempt to find him an appropriate marriage partner:

*Adjoa era una ragazza corpulenta, con il fondo schiena prominente, come piace agli uomini da noi. Non si lamentò per il mio ritardo ed era tutta sorrisi ed occhi abbassati...Ai miei tentativi di conversazione per riempire con banalità quel silenzio d'imbarazzo che aleggiava nel salotto, lei rispondeva sempre sorridendo con 'sì' e "no" senza aggiungere niente di suo... Quel*

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<sup>82</sup> The exact location remains unknown to the reader but one assumes that it is a former French colony because French is spoken.

*confronto diventava insopportabile, un vero insulto alla mia intelligenza e alla sua dignità.*  
(p. 31)<sup>83</sup>

His attraction to Neyla on the other hand, is based primarily on the fact that she appears French, so much so, that he is convinced she has lived in Paris, and he tells his brother that “*sembra una bianca tinta di nero.*” (p.12) [she looks like a white woman painted black.] Pretty, modern, outspoken and well dressed, Neyla, skin colour apart, neatly fits the profile and characteristics of the European city female. This incident is significant because it points to two factors. First, as Jankélévitch suggested (p.32), Yawo’s way of thinking, like all returning migrants, suggests that he is no longer the same person he was when he left, and secondly, like Fofu in “*Mal di..*”, Yawo now perceives his host country’s culture to be superior, and therefore his perception of female beauty is no longer governed by his native culture.

Linked to this there is however, a third factor. If, as Komli-Ebri indicated in the preface *Neyla is Africa and Africa is Neyla*, then one must deduce that in her emancipated and westernized ways Neyla is also symbolic of a changing Africa. (I deal with this concept on pp. 57-60)

“*Si vede dagli occhiali da sole e dalla pipa che tiene in bocca che arriva dall’Europa!*” (p.9) [One can see from your sunglasses and the pipe in your mouth that you come from Europe]. With these words Neyla candidly sums up Yawo on their first meeting, and while the pipe gives the impression of a debonair, confident person who exudes an aura of success, this image is overshadowed by the dark tinted sunglasses, symbolic of the universal protective device of those who are unsure of, or worse still are hiding their identity. As the novel progresses, it will become clear that this is but the beginning of a looming identity crisis brought about by a dichotomy in his psyche due to the two diverse cultures he is living with.

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<sup>83</sup> [Adjoa was a heavy girl, with a prominent lower back, as is liked by the men here. She did not complain about my being late and she was all smiles with her eyes always downcast... At my attempts of conversing in order to fill with trivialities that embarrassing silence that hovered in the lounge, she would answer smilingly with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ never adding anything of her own... That encounter was becoming intolerable, a real insult to my intelligence and to her dignity.]



This crisis becomes more apparent as the days pass and Yawo's elation at returning back home is clearly evident in the following passage:

*Essere a casa, un anonimo fra tanti altri, con nessuno che ti squadra, senza sentirti una bestia rara, come in Europa. [...] Sì, ero a casa. (p.11)<sup>84</sup>*

However this soon changes as he becomes increasingly aware of a new distance between him and his family:

*Capivo le loro preoccupazioni, ma ormai il tempo e la distanza avevano creato un abisso incolmabile fra di noi. A che pro scontrarmi con loro con discorsi che non avrei mai capito? Non avrei fatto altro che incrementare il distacco indotto dalla mia acculturazione.(p.24)<sup>85</sup>*

While *Neyla* is for the most part a love story, it is in the descriptive scenes of both an urban and rural Africa that Komla-Ebri succeeds in portraying the returning protagonist's feeling of dislocation. This is brought on not only by feelings of hostility and alienation but also by a new awareness of his surroundings and his people which ultimately leads him to perceive himself as 'other'. In recreating the hustle and bustle of the street markets and port activities as seen through the eyes of Yawo, the author reminds the reader of a changing Africa, influenced by the promise of a better life as portrayed by the western world. However, when Yawo stops to observe the dockers offloading merchandise from the ships in the early hours of the morning, for a meagre salary, he realizes that no matter how difficult it is to be away from his homeland he can no longer return to stay:

*Io ero angosciato per loro. Mi resi conto di essere un privilegiato, anche se mi lamentavo della lontananza, anche se la sera la nostalgia mi attanagliava; ma non avrei per niente al mondo scambiato la mia vita con la loro. (p.29)<sup>86</sup>*

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<sup>84</sup> [To be home, and to be anonymous amongst many others, with no one to look you up and down, to not feel like a rare beast as was the case in Europe. [...]. Yes, I was home]

<sup>85</sup> [I understood their preoccupations, but now time and distance had created an 'unbridgeable' abyss between us. What point was there in clashing with them with discussions that they could never understand? I would simply increase the distance caused by my acculturation.]

<sup>86</sup> [I was distressed for them. I realized that I was privileged, even if I complained about the distances, even if in the evenings I was gripped by nostalgia, but nothing in the world would make me exchange my life for theirs.]

As the 'other', Yawo is now acutely aware of his surroundings and recognizes that the lures of the western world, coupled with greed and vice, have resulted in the descent of postcolonial governments into corruption, disorganisation and cynicism. This is clear when he witnesses a scene at the harbour where the customs officer refuses to release a vehicle to a foreigner until he is bribed:

*Stupito, vidi il 'francese' prendere in mano un biglietto da cinquemila franchi: il nostro doganiere lo intascò di fronte a tutti, senza battere ciglio, e se ne andò con passo tranquillo a sollevare la sbarra. Rimasi sconvolto. Pensavo che fossimo sul bordo del baratro, invece avevamo già toccata il fondo.(p.30)<sup>87</sup>*

Komla-Ebri paints a sober portrait of how modern Africa with its corrupt governments, abetted by the west, has succeeded in stealing the future of the voiceless millions living in poverty. However, unlike the stereotypical 'other', the protagonist's acknowledgement of this degenerate situation has not stripped him of his compassion, if anything it has served to sensitise him even more. This is evident when the suffering and deprivation brought about as a result of a continent unable to home in on its own resources and largely forgotten by an indifferent first world, is described in the scene where Yawo rushes to the hospital in search of Neyla:

*Stanzoni con dieci-quindici letti, altre donne anche qui sdraite su delle stuoie o su delle lenzuola sporche, sul lurido e freddo pavimento. Povera umanità sofferente che per diritto ad ogni cura doveva sempre pagare in anticipo. Chi non aveva i mezzi si affidava ai ciarlatani o al suo destino, mentre in Europa, tanti farmaci giacevano, scadendo nell'oblio degli armadi (p.88)<sup>88</sup>.*

Although the reader has no indication of how long Yawo has been away from home, his growing unease with his native people suggests that as a result of his acculturation he has undergone a change in his identity and is no longer comfortable with his roots. The ruralness of Africa only adds to his sense of 'unbelonging' and it is therefore

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<sup>87</sup> [Stunned, I watched as the 'Frenchman' took out a five thousand franc note, our customs officer put it in his pocket in front of everyone without batting an eye, and proceeded to calmly lift the boom. I was shocked. I thought we were on the edge of an abyss, instead we had already touched rock bottom.]

<sup>88</sup> [There were rooms with ten-fifteen beds, some women were lying on mats and on dirty sheets on the filthy, cold floor. Wretched suffering humanity who in the hope of a cure had to pay up in advance...Those who couldn't afford it put their lives in the hands of charlatans or of their destiny, whilst in Europe medicines lie forgotten in cupboards.]

understandable that he finds shelter with Neyla, an African city girl. Neyla is a complex and profound figure because, with her western attitudes, she appears to encapsulate what he is searching for, i.e. the union of two diverse cultures – Africa and Europe, tradition and modernity. Primarily, she is instrumental in reuniting him with his roots.

The pivotal moment in Yawo's search for his self is unmistakable in the following soliloquy. This emotional recount, takes place as Yawo's relationship with Neyla progresses from a casual sexual encounter to an awareness of his love for her, a love that runs parallel to the reawakening of his love for Africa:

*Grazie, Neyla, per avermi ricongiunto a me stesso, alla mia gente e alla mia infanzia. Grazie per aver saputo risvegliare ricordi e sensazioni che nell'arsura si erano assopiti, in letargo, da qualche parte dentro di me, perché per sopravvivere, per non soccombere alla nostalgia, avevo dovuto murarmi dentro ricordi, sentimenti, annullare le mie radici per impregnarmi totalmente nella mia nuova situazione. Ho sempre dovuto lasciare qualche cosa o qualcuno per inseguire il mio destino ed ero arrivato al punto di non sapere più chi fossi. Non ero né di qua né di là. Preso in quella morsa sandwich di due culture, stavo diventando generazione ibrida, non essendo più né africano totalmente e neanche europeo. Ho vissuto per anni in quella fitta nebbia fra il non più e il non ancora, sulla strada vischiosa ed incerta di un divenire. (Neyla p. 44)<sup>89</sup>*

Komla-Ebri, through Yawo's search, portrays Africa/Neyla not only as the motherland but also as the mother/lover figure who has the power to heal his battered soul that for so long denied the very person he was in order to survive the acculturation. Africa/Neyla holds the key that can unlock and restore pent-up memories and feelings linked to the old identity, yet there is no doubt that the actual coming together of the various

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<sup>89</sup> [Thank you, Neyla, for having reunited me with myself, with my people and my youth. Thank you for having awakened memories and feelings that in the drought of my life had grown drowsy and had gone into hiding somewhere in my heart, because in order to survive and not to give in to nostalgia I had been forced to wall up my memories, my feelings, to abnegate my very roots in order to immerse myself in this new situation. I have always had to leave something or someone behind in order to follow my destiny to such an extent that I no longer knew who I was. I was neither here nor there. Caught in a sandwich vice of two cultures I was becoming a hybrid generation, no longer African and not yet European. I lived for years in that thick fog oscillating between no longer and not yet, on an uncertain and sticky road to becoming]

identities, which will take place at the end of the novel with the death of Neyla, is seen as a painful process comparable to a birth, a type of metamorphosis that in its liberation carries with it deep emotional scars.

As a result of his status as both an African and a black man in a so-called 'white continent', Yawo's identity has become fragmented. To ensure his survival in Europe he, like many other migrants, has been forced to deny the part of his soul that was wholly African. Significantly, when he returns to Africa, he continues inwardly to deny the African in him. He defends his need to recoil from certain situations, such as marrying a black rural woman, constant interference of the extended family, continuous loud talking and the arrival of unannounced guests at any given hour, as a byproduct of his acculturation and declares himself *"più individualista ed egoista dei bianchi stessi"* (p.13) [more self-centred and selfish than the whites themselves]. The essence of his experience is an encapsulation of a kind of social 'schizophrenia': confronted with the great difficulty experienced in terms of his immersion into African culture Yawo, caught in a *"morsa sandwich di due culture"* (p. 44) [sandwich vice of two cultures] between Europe and Africa becomes a universal figure representative of all returning migrants. The central thread of the story is about the pain and confusion of identity and the seeming 'unresolvability' of Yawo's situation.

Ironically, his safety net with Neyla will shatter as he undertakes a physical journey inland that runs parallel to a deep, psychological need. It is here, where Africa is depicted as still uncontaminated by western culture that Yawo will be forced to confront his roots and those specific aspects of his identity that are frowned upon and ridiculed by Eurocentric attitudes. Nowhere is the result of acculturation more pronounced, nor his alienation from his homeland more evident, than in the subsequent scene.

In this episode, Neyla, in the presence of Yawo's uncle, a *guaritore* [traditional healer], falls into a trance and channels messages to Yawo from his dead ancestors. One particular message makes reference to Neyla but carries with it a negative connotation. *"Digli che la donna che ha accanto non..."* (p.73) [Tell him that the woman that is beside him, will/does/can not...] However, the message remains incomplete because the energies that have taken over Neyla's body are so intense that she loses

consciousness. In this way, Yawo is left speculating on what the spirits could have meant. Deeply superstitious, yet terrified in giving in so completely to his African roots and thereby losing his identity - his new European identity - Yawo tries to minimize and belittle the incident. He leaves the hinterland with Neyla, profoundly disturbed, not yet comprehending that it is precisely in going to these extremes, that he is able later to find a middle ground, a blending or fusion of his African heritage and European identity. To protect himself, on his way home, he distances himself from Neyla and anyone representing who he no longer thinks he is "*ero esasperato dalla lentezza di quel paese, di quella gente*" (p.74) [I was exasperated by the slowness of that country, those people]. Ironically, it is in the midst of all this upheaval that Yawo's love for Neyla grows more powerful and intense, and by extension so too does his love for Africa.

Neyla's death is extremely significant in the context of the narrative as it indicates that it takes a tragedy of this magnitude to make Yawo truly acknowledge his deep feelings of love for Neyla/Africa. Her death, brought about by the miscarriage of a child that is not Yawo's, and very possibly is that of a white man, symbolizes, in my view, the demise of the last trace of Yawo's divided identity; an identity that like the unborn child was never really his. Indeed, the conclusion of the text marks a great climatic moment and turning point for Yawo with regard to his identity. In finally declaring his love for Neyla/Africa, Yawo is able to reconcile his love for Africa with his European identity. Through his giving in to emotion, Yawo is provided with a cathartic opportunity, to heal and to overcome his sense of 'unbelonging' in his homeland.

Komla-Ebri does not suggest that Yawo should abandon either his African heritage or his European identity, but rather that the solution lies in a fusion of both the modern and the traditional worlds. Through Neyla, Yawo is able to fuse successfully the modern European aspects of himself with his love of traditional Africa. And this is symbolically achieved through the cycle of birth and death, which runs parallel to his relationship with Neyla. Yawo, born to Africa, leaves her to live in Europe. Africa dies in him as his journey in Europe changes his identity. His return to Africa is a rebirth as his relationship with Neyla develops. Neyla, just like Africa, does not force him to love her or accept her, but by being true to who she is, he falls in love with her, in the same way that he falls in love with Africa all over again. Neyla dies and it is ironic that through her

death, he understands who he is as a person. He is re-united to his childhood, his family, his traditions and culture, and returns to Europe with a more profound sense of his identity and position between two opposing worlds.

### CHAPTER 3. The Crossroads

Exploring the physical and internal journeys embarked upon by the characters in the narrative texts *Neyla* and *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*.

**The crossroads: Journeys of growth and hope –“*Abra: all'incrocio dei sentieri*”, “*Due scatole di fiammiferi*”**

In the collection *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*, Komla-Ebri has brought together an array of different stories, which can be read separately but at the same time, are all linked in some way or another. More significant is the fact that all the characters have chosen to embark on a personal journey and all have had to face crossroads where their decision has irrevocably altered their lives. For all of Komla-Ebri's characters, although the journey to and from the crossroads has been arduous, it has at the same time been transformative. The crossroads are a defining point in a person's life because not only do they signal the beginning of a journey but the decision taken will forever merge and separate two worlds. The crossroads symbolize a necessary transition from the old to the new, from one place of life to another, and as in Nukuku's case in “*Quando attraverserò il fiume*”, and Togbé in “*Due Scatole di Fiammiferi*”, from life to death. This does not mean that life before the crossroads was meaningless; it simply suggests the need for a different direction. Within this collage, Komla-Ebri narrates the journey of various members of this close-knit family/clan, some of whom have migrated to foreign countries, others to urban cities, yet all maintain a strong attachment to their motherland, their traditions and above all their people.

Although the narrative of Komla- Ebri breaks away from that of the first African migrant writers in that it is fictitious, it would be wrong to say that it is not a testimony to the author's own personal experience. If Komla-Ebri's writings cannot be considered autobiographical in content, they do contain, in light of my previous suggestion, definite extracts of his own experience. Consequently, Komla-Ebri's work can be seen as an expression of various phases in his individual journey. As the author himself said: “*si tende a scrivere innanzitutto su ciò che si conosce, che si sente di più e che ci sta a cuore.*”<sup>90</sup> [One tends to write primarily about what one knows, about what one feels most, and what is in one's heart.] Therefore, many of the characters and stories are

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<sup>90</sup> Intervista online Kossi Komla- Ebri; *Mal d'Africa...Mal ...d'Europa*. [www.comune fe.it/voci dal silenzio](http://www.comune.fe.it/voci dal silenzio)

linked and inspired in some way by his own personal journey, first as a struggling migrant and then as a returning son.

In this regard, in dealing with the themes of the journey and the return home, I will from time to time refer to various characters in his short stories from *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri* and in the novel *Neyla* to show in which ways they are drawn from the authors' own personal experience.

While the short story "*Abra: All'Incrocio dei sentieri*" narrates a family reunion, this event serves only as a margin to the story. The core of the story begins with the various events that lead up to the character Abra's decision to leave her home, and the ensuing curse brought upon her by her mother. As in the short story "*Mal di...*", and in some cases in the novel *Neyla*, Komla-Ebri deliberately chooses in "*Abra: All'incrocio dei sentieri*" to narrate as a female. His reason for doing this is twofold: First, it is an attempt on his part to "*entrare nell'anima femminile e parlare al femminile ed esprimere sensazioni che sono diverse nel linguaggio maschile*" [enter the female soul and to speak in a feminine manner and to express feelings that are different in male language, and secondly because "*Le donne sono più piene e complete perché riescono a vivere tutte le loro emozioni.*"<sup>91</sup> [Women are more wholesome and complete because they know how to live out all their emotions]. While in "*Abra:All'Incrocio dei sentieri*" Komla-Ebri succeeds in shedding his 'maleness' and convincingly takes on the role of female narrator, this is not the case in *Neyla*. Infact, Komla-Ebri's attempt in engaging in female language in the novel is disappointing and this is largely due as Annie Gagiano<sup>92</sup> observed, "to the employment throughout of a very particular type of male gaze and of an exclusively male voice in retrospective monologues".<sup>93</sup> The passage cited in the footnote is one of several instances where the author's attempt to take on a female role in not successful<sup>94</sup>.

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<sup>91</sup> Intervista a Kossi Komla-Ebri: *Africa/Italia due continenti si avvicinano*: Peter N. Pedroni, 1999. [http://www.kossi-komlaebri.net/intervista\\_pedroni.php](http://www.kossi-komlaebri.net/intervista_pedroni.php) Accessed 29 June 2006.

<sup>92</sup> Annie Gagiano is professor of English at the University of Stellenbosch.

<sup>93</sup> [www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin](http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin) July 2006. Review on Komla-Ebri's novel *Neyla*.

<sup>94</sup> There are several instances in *Neyla* where, in my view, the author is extreme when engaging in female talk and as a result in these occasions *Neyla* does not come across as sincere nor is her character enhanced. One such example is *Neyla*'s constant referral to Yawo as "*Grand'uomo venuto dall'Europa*". On p.17 we read "*Grand'uomo venuto dall'Europa, tu hai già deciso di scoparmi stasera, vero?*" [Big man



In 'Abra', Komla-Ebri exposes the reader to a variety of explicitly African rituals and cultural traditions, but this setting simply forms the background to the story, which has a far more universal theme. Abra too is at a crossroads: she has to make an important decision that will impact on her life and carry with it consequences. In order to be with the man she loves she must undertake "*un grande passo*" [a huge step] and leave her village that –

*mi aveva visto nascere, crescere, giocare, ridere, piangere, ballare ed innamorarmi. Lasciavo l'innocenza, la mia infanzia e la sua spensieratezza. Lasciavo mia madre e la migliore amica che non avrei mai più avuta. Lasciavo una parte di me a Ablome.*(p.106)<sup>95</sup>

In this very telling extract, the distress caused by the decision to leave and the actual act of leaving, becomes apparent. In Abra's case, her need to leave is further intensified by her mother's bitterness and cruel attitude towards her. If she were not to leave she may well follow her in a life of resentment and solitude. However, self-imposed freedom will come at a price, and she will now be condemned to adulthood and the anxieties that accompany it.

In Komla-Ebri's narrative, although the protagonists accept their destiny<sup>96</sup> without reflecting on how much choice they had in the actual decision, the choice or lack of it has little bearing on the outcome. What is significant is that all the characters, regardless of where fate has brought them, will now undertake an internal journey, which has more devastating and overwhelming consequences than the physical journey that accompanies them. This is clearly apparent in the following passage that sees Abra remembering the day she made her way to the crossroads:

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who hails from Europe, you have already decided to fuck me tonight, right?] , on p. 21 she says "*Grand'uomo d'Europa che dice grandi parole*" [Big man from Europe whosays big words], and again on p. 80 "*Grand'uomo venuto dall'Europa, che decide tutto, che pretende tutto, che giudica tutto.*" [Big man who hails from Europe, who decides everything, who expects everything who judges everyone]

<sup>95</sup> [had seen me born, grow up, play, laugh, cry, dance and fall in love. I was leaving my innocence, my youth and its carefree days. I was leaving my mother and my best friend that I would never have again. I was leaving a part of me in Ablomé].

<sup>96</sup> I deal with the concept of destiny in African culture on pp.75-76

*[...] è duro scegliere. Col tempo ho imparato che la vita è una scelta continua, che il destino ti pone sempre di fronte ad un bivio e che quasi sempre la via più semplice non è quella giusta, e quella giusta all'inizio sembra un tunnel buio.(p.106)<sup>97</sup>*

Whether it is a physical journey as embarked upon by Fofó's sister in "*Mal di*", Abra in "*Abra: all'incrocio dei sentieri*", Yao in "*Vado a casa*", Togbé in "*Due scatole di fiammiferi*" and Yawo in *Neyla*, or a life-changing decision as taken by Fofó in "*La Ricchezza del Povero*", Komla-Ebri's characters have all in some way experienced the same deep-rooted emotions. In all instances the new direction has brought to light the 'io migrante' [the migrant 'I'] and the consequences manifested with loss of all that is familiar and safe. As time passes, all these characters will feel more and more cut off from patterns that have previously given shape and meaning to their lives. Leaving all that is familiar and starting over involves, amongst other things, not understanding the patterns that permeate cultures different from theirs. It also means being judged and alienated by the 'new' others as a result of this inadequacy. Leaving means struggling in social situations and in doing so, huge portions of their personal life may well die from emotional starvation. However, the most dramatic outcome of leaving is, that because there is no longer any validation of who they are, they all ultimately feel stripped of their identity.

The short story "*Due scatole di Fiammiferi*" (Two matchboxes) in *All'Incrocio Dei Sentieri* is not only a tapestry of many of the motifs that exemplify Komla-Ebri's narrative but also provides a solution for the fragmented identities born as a result of the journey embarked on. Set in Italy, it recounts a man's journey from his rural village in Africa to a modern city in Italy where he finds his soul mate on a train. However their journey together is short-lived because he, being terminally ill, dies, leaving her pregnant with their love child. Central to the story is the fact that he is black and she is white, and that their child conceived in love will be "*un figlio color acquerello un figlio color pastello un figlio arcobaleno....*" (p.32) [a pastel colour child a watercolor child a rainbow child ...] This concept of a child born from a white and a black parent, apart from its biographical

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<sup>97</sup> [...it's difficult to choose. With time I learned that life is made up of continuous choices, that destiny always puts a crossroad in front of you and that almost always the easy road is not the right one, and the right one in the beginning seems like a dark tunnel...]

reference<sup>98</sup>, is not new to Komla-Ebri's narrative. Highlighted in the novel *Neyla*, the birth of a child of mixed blood is seen as a powerful healing tool: not only does it restore hope, and as in "*Due Scatole di Fiammiferi*" can "*rischiare la notte scura*" (p.32) [bring light to the dark night.], but it can also act as a bridge between two diverse cultures and create a 'new man'.

In *Neyla*, although the unborn child's paternity is unknown, the death of both mother and child serves as a catalyst in assisting the protagonist to find his fragmented identity. In "*Due scatole di Fiammiferi*" the child born healthy and strong carries with him not only the hope of the future but also continuity, aptly suggested through his name Apélété, which means "the house will survive". Komla-Ebri's message is clear: the path to overcoming intolerance, xenophobia and racism is not by means of speeches and promises of reform made by power-hungry politicians, but by love and tolerance. Only love has the power to span the universe, break down barriers and defeat its adversaries, so that new things can be created together.

Throughout the short story the theme of the return is also prevalent even if under a different guise. Togbé's return home will be the final stage of his physical journey because as he says to his wife Francesca "*...la morte non è mai fine a se stessa. Noi non siamo altro che anime perennemente in viaggio...*" (p. 39) [Death is never the end of everything. We are but souls forever on a journey...] Togbé's last journey takes place in the form of two matchboxes, a ritual that although odd to western readers is no stranger than some western customs must appear to Africans. Francesca, having placed her dead husband's nails and hair in two match boxes according to his instructions, sends one to her in-laws and buries the other under the shade of a tree where Togbé would often sit and rest. This symbolic gesture is twofold.

First, the author gives the readers the opportunity to assist in a ritual far removed from their own custom but where the common denominator is love. Secondly and equally importantly, by allowing Francesca to carry out the ritual in Italy, Komla-Ebri gives the reader a lesson in tolerance, which in itself is transformative. By respectfully adhering to her husband's request and accepting the diversity of his culture, Francesca opens a

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<sup>98</sup> Komla-Ebri is married to a white Italian woman and has two children.

door into the hearts of her African family. The gesture is also heavily laden with symbolic meaning as only the hair and nails continue to grow throughout one's life and therefore are carriers of '*energia vitale*' (p.39) Moreover, the fact that one matchbox is sent to Africa whilst the other remains in Italy, not only represents the coming together of two diverse cultures, but also suggests that Togbé continues to 'live' in both worlds.

The cultural rift is further narrowed down when the new baby refuses any form of nourishment and the mother deliberately chooses to sidestep medical technology, an integral part of her culture, in favour of an ancestral African rite. Remembering the story Togbé had told her of how he as an infant, displaying the same symptoms had been wrapped in his father's *kente*<sup>99</sup>, she chooses the same remedy. Swaddled in his dead father's shirt, the child is immediately pacified and Francesca's gesture, under the incredulous eyes of her mother, goes a long way towards bridging the divide between the two cultures. Similarly, in the story "*Yevi-il-ragno*" dealt with on pages. 35-36, Komla-Ebri, by introducing a western fable in an African context, not only creates a feeling of universality, but also builds a bridge between the cultures and customs of Africa and the west, further reinforced by the marriage of the princess to Yévi the black spider.

There is in fact a strong link between "*Yevi-il-Ragno*" and "*Due Scatole Di Fiammiferi*". Not only are both male protagonists black and have left their hometown in search of a better life, but both fall in love with a woman who belongs to a culture different from their own. However, the author's message goes well beyond the realms of everyday domestic situations, and if understood, its consequences can be far reaching. It is only with tolerance and love that the human race can begin to overcome xenophobic tendencies and learn to accept other forms of cultural differences. This concept is neatly summed up in the words of the king in "*Yévi-il-ragno*": "*Impareremo da lui e lui imparerà da noi, perché quando la mandibola e la mascella si incontrano, rompono un osso.*" (p.65) [We will learn from him and he will learn from us, because it is only when the lower and upper jaw meet, that they break the bone.]

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<sup>99</sup> Robe

### 3.2. The Return - A New Journey: Rediscovering Africa in *Neyla*

In “*Vado A Casa*” and “*Mal di*” (*All’Incrocio dei Sentieri*), Komla-Ebri deals explicitly with the nostalgia associated with being in a foreign country and the need to return home. In the novel *Neyla* and the short story “*Mal di...*” both characters (Yawo and Fofò’s sister) reflect the ambivalence towards home experienced by returning migrants in general. In fact, it is rare that the returning migrant does not feel a sense of dislocation. Time, physical distance and cultural shifts as a result of migration create a gulf between home and the returnee which, contribute to the characters feeling like outsiders in their own homeland. Both characters are now caught between modernity and tradition and we have already seen how Fofò’s sister can no longer live without the comforts of electricity and hot water. In “*Mal di*” Komla-Ebri touches briefly on Fofò’s sister’s return home but only to mention how she sets about in recreating bits of Italy (cf pp 32-34); nowhere is her state of mind discussed.

In “*Vado A Casa*”, the ‘promised land’ has so disappointed and eluded the main character Yao that he clings desperately to the dream of what returning home should be like. Although Komla-Ebri does not say so, the reader assumes that like most migrants, Yao left Abidjan because of hardships and lack of opportunities. Paris, which he believed would lessen his problems and afford him a better life, served only to humiliate and ostracize him. Life in Paris is described by Yao as being *disumana* (p.18), *crudele* and *cinica* (p.19) [inhuman, cruel and cynical], bringing him only misery and adversity.

In a reversal of roles, it is no longer the Paris of the *cartoline* [postcards] and the *bistrot* and the *Tour Eiffel* (p.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*’ [spicy skewers] and dancing until dawn “*al ritmo di reggae*” [to the rhythm of reggae] with “*vere ragazze africane, calde, con dei seni belli, sodi*” (p.22) [real, warm African girls, with beautiful hard breasts].

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 method does not replace his longing and yearning

for home, the magical quality with which the hometown is recreated in his memories, does prevent him from harbouring unpleasant and contradictory feelings towards it. In the novel *Neyla*, however, by physically returning home, Komla-Ebri forces the main character to nose-dive into his feelings as he finds himself in a no-man's land suspended between two countries and two cultures.

As previously stated, in *Neyla*, the author recounts a love story between the narrator, a returning African national residing in Europe, and an African city girl, Neyla. This is Komla-Ebri's first novel, and the actual plot can appear to be thin and somewhat clichéd. There is after all, nothing unique in a love story born out of a summer romance between a returning resident and a local woman with a secret past. However, the originality of this novel does not lie in the love story itself between the two protagonists, nor was this, in my view, the author's objective. Rather, the romance between Neyla and Yawo is a springboard to introduce concerns and problems encountered by migrants in general upon returning home.

In Chapter 2.1, I dealt with the issue of identity and the internal conflict that ensued as a result of Yawo's newly acquired European identity and his African heritage. In this section I will attempt to explore the love/hate relationship that has developed between the narrator Yawo, and his homeland, Africa. In doing so I will show how one of the dominant themes in Komla-Ebri's narrative, *il ritorno* [the return home] and the sense of unbelonging closely associated with it, are mirrored in this novel.

In an interview with Pedro Pedroni, Komla-Ebri stated that the novel *Neyla* is above all "*la rappresentazione schematica di un mio rapporto d'amore con l'Africa e una visione dell'Africa odierna. L'Africa è Neyla e Neyla è l'Africa*"<sup>100</sup> [a schematic representation of my love affair with Africa and a vision of Africa as it is today. Africa is Neyla and Neyla is Africa]. Therefore, it is imperative that in analysing the novel, the history and psychology of the returning protagonist/migrant is taken into account as it is a crucial component of the protagonist's new perception of Africa.

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<sup>100</sup> Preface *Neyla* p.6. Pedro/Peter Pedroni, Dept of French and Italian, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

Once home, the protagonist Yawo in the novel *Neyla*, finds that after the exhilaration of being home has subsided, he is unable to shake off the feelings of discomfort that seem to inhabit his consciousness. The reasons for these feelings are multifold. First, the protagonist himself is not the same person he was upon his departure and therefore his perception of the way he sees things has also been altered. What may have appeared normal and quite acceptable to him prior to his leaving, is now, due to his acculturation, not only a source of irritation, but utterly unacceptable. In the following passage, Yawo, on his way home from having visited Neyla, notices the state of the roads and makes the following observations:

*La minima pioggia la trasformava in laghi, pozzanghere, pantani di fango. Di questa situazione la pioggia non era l'unica complice. V'era anche la detestabile abitudine di rovesciare in strada l'acqua del bucato, del bagno, dei piatti lavati. Alcuni uscivano addirittura in strada per urinare. [...] Pensare che già al tempo dei romani c'erano delle fognature! È incredibile: noi africani non riusciamo ad imparare dalle esperienze positive degli altri, continuiamo imperterriti a rifare gli stessi errori.*<sup>101</sup> (pp.30-31)

Secondly, as Remo Cacciatori argues in the commentary in *Neyla*<sup>102</sup>, he who returns home may be admired for having had the courage to leave in the first place, but he will have to suffer the consequences before being forgiven for having left. Returning with fertile experiences and with more knowledge is not necessarily positive, and the motherland can and will be mistrustful because “*il suo sapere e la sua esperienza sono il frutto di germi estranei e forse pericolose.*” [His knowledge and experience are fruits of foreign seeds and dangerous forces].

This is clearly evident when, at the beginning of their relationship Neyla accuses him of being like the ‘white’ people. “*Sei come loro: sei venuto qui in ferie per divertirti un po’ e*

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<sup>101</sup> [The slightest bit of rain would transform them into lakes, puddles, muddy marshes. The rain was not the only factor to be blamed for this situation. There was also the disgusting habit of throwing out laundry water, bath water, dish washing water. Some people would actually come out of their homes to urinate on the street. [...] To think that drainage systems already existed during the time of the Romans! It's incredible, we Africans, are not capable of learning from the positive experiences of others, we continue unperturbed to redo the same mistakes.]

<sup>102</sup> *Neyla* ( pp 98-102)

*fra poco te ne andrai e di Neyla non ti ricorderai più.*” (p.19) [you are just like them: you came here on holiday to enjoy yourself a bit, and soon you will go and forget all about Neyla.] Thirdly, and equally important is the fact that the migrant returns home to a changed reality. In Yawo’s case what he must confront is primarily the acknowledgement of a changing, unfamiliar Africa towards which he is resentful, yet deeply attracted to in spite of its *gauche* attempts at westernizing itself.

If, as Komla-Ebri stated, “*Neyla è l’Africa e l’Africa è Neyla*”, then Neyla is above all the allegorical representation of this changing Africa that greets Yawo upon his return home. As a result of these factors, the journey home for Yawo becomes a journey into his psyche and symbolically a search for his African roots. Equally significant is the fact that he is unable to undertake this venture on his own, and Neyla becomes the singular force who, through her love and courage, assists and guides him through this journey.

The representation of Neyla is a complex, multilayered one. Like other legendary female characters such as Calypso, Circe, Penelope<sup>103</sup> who are all an intrinsic part of the journey and homecoming of Odysseus, Neyla embodies, as Cacciatori says, *‘lo spirito del luogo, le sue radici.’*<sup>104</sup> [The spirit of the place, its roots]. Shy, yet courageous and passionate, this fragile character is but the material form of an Africa struggling to survive and change, yet inclined to self-destruct. Enmeshed in a self-seeking life, Europe is represented in this novel by the barrage of tourists who after having feasted upon her beauty forget easily about the struggling third world that is Africa. The most obvious example is Claude Delaunay, Neyla’s white lover who seduces her, exploits her and then abandons her, leaving her pregnant, impoverished and in despair.

*Fu in quel periodo che incontrasti Claude Delauney, che si dissetò senza vergogna né ritegno alla fonte della tua giovinezza, t’insegnò e pretese da te, senza pudore, modi e modi di fare all’amore, ti usò e ti sfruttò, facendoti balenare il sogno di portarti poi in Europa. [...] Purtroppo la realtà era ben diversa dai sogni.*<sup>105</sup>  
(p. 20)

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<sup>103</sup> Calypso, Greek nymph who held Odysseus captive for 7 years, impeding his return home. Circe, Greek Goddess who assisted Odysseus in his quest to reach home. Penelope, Odysseus’ wife who waited faithfully for his return home.

<sup>104</sup> “La donna e i procedimenti del ritorno” in *Postfazione Neyla*. Milano: Edizione dell’Arco. 2003

<sup>105</sup> [It was during that time that you met Claude Delaunay, who quenched his thirst without shame or restraint at the fountain of your youth, teaching you and expecting you to make love in various ways



Yet, notwithstanding this reality, Cacciatori argues that although in Neyla Africa is no longer “*una terra idilliaca*” [an idyllic land] because it has known ‘*lo sfruttamento dell’occidente*’ [exploitation by the West] “*ne vive ancora la seduzione*” [It is still seduced by it].

It is this fragile, easily seduced and impoverished Africa existing beyond the family confines Yawo returns to, so it is not coincidental that he is drawn to Neyla. She alone, as the symbolic representation of this new, struggling Africa, has the power to take him back to his Africa, the home that he had for so long denied. As he slowly faces up to the loneliness and indifference that engulfed him in the host country, so his vision of Africa changes, and by opening his heart to Neyla, he opens his heart to Africa. In the passage that follows, the novel not only links up with the struggling migrant Yao in “*Vado a Casa*” but takes a universal turn as the pain and suffering of every migrant is exposed in a flowing, highly poignant and poetic style:

*Da anni avrei voluto poter piangere l’angoscia opprimente che mi stringeva nella sua morsa, le lacrime ogni volta represses all’ultimo sguardo silenzioso, dignitoso dei miei genitori che mi abbracciavano dolorosamente prima di girarmi le spalle.[...] Avrei voluto piangere su quello che volevo essere e quello che ho dovuto essere[...] Piangere sulla mia coscienza mille volte violentata, sui miei sorrisi ipocriti , la rabbia camuffata , per assicurarmi il pane e ripararmi dal freddo[...] piangere sulla mia pelle , sulla mia Africa sempre sulla sponda della miseria, sulla mia gente, tanto sentita da spaccarmi l’anima... (pp. 45-46) <sup>106</sup>*

Neyla, as already indicated, has a multifaceted role. On the one level she is Yawo’s lover, but this role serves as a catalyst to expose her other more complex tasks. Not only is she the protagonist’s therapist, listening patiently as he discloses his deepest feelings, but she also acts as his confessor and as such she transfers to him the power

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without reserve, by flashing before you the dream that he would then take you with him to Europe. [...]

Unfortunately, reality was very different from your dreams.]

<sup>106</sup>[ For years I would have wanted to cry for the overwhelming anguish that would close me in its vice , for the tears held back each time my parents embraced me with great sadness, before turning away with a last silent, dignified, glance. [...]I would have wanted to cry about what I had wanted to become and what I was forced to become...Cry about my conscience violated a thousand times, my hypocritical smiles , my camouflaged anger, to guarantee me some bread and a shelter from the cold...cry about my skin , my Africa always on the edge of misery, my people for whom I felt so much , that my heart would break ...]

not only to heal but also to forgive himself. In healing his dichotomous mind that for so long had struggled to come to terms with the person he had become, she gives him the key to forgive himself for betraying the colour of his own skin, and by extension for betraying his beloved Africa. In the above cited confession, charged with emotion and disguised as a tribute to Neyla<sup>107</sup>, Komla-Ebri, not only succeeds in engaging the reader, but also induces reflection on the nature of the situation of migrants in general.

The analogy between Neyla and Africa becomes clearer as the relationship between the two lovers develops. Just as the protagonist's love for Neyla is powerful and intense, so too by extension, is his love for Africa. Neyla's pregnancy by another man, perhaps even a white man, is regarded by Yawo as a betrayal of his love for her. In the same vein, the fact that Africa betrays herself by prostituting herself to the west is similarly a betrayal of African people such as Yawo. It is Komla-Ebri's own status as both African and European that lends credibility to the narrative and succeeds in capturing the concept of an increasingly transforming Africa through the figure of Neyla.

As the story unfolds, the importance of Neyla in the protagonist's quest to rediscover his African roots becomes more apparent, and for this reason the two cannot be separated. It also becomes clear that there are two Africas represented in this novel and each one plays a significant role in Yawo's search for his lost identity. Whilst the protagonist seems to cope fairly well with the more urban Africa, essentially because it has already been tainted by western civilization and therefore appears closer to his new way of life, rural Africa, on the other hand, seems to have a more powerful hold on him. The reason is that this Africa is Yawo's link to his forgotten childhood and by undertaking the journey with Neyla into the interior to visit his relatives, he not only gathers his long forgotten memories, but the fog that had descended upon his heart begins to clear:

*Dimentico di tutti, continuai a scrutare l'orizzonte ed infine vidi apparire i nostri monti. Sbarrai gli occhi per meglio abbracciarli con lo sguardo e riempirmi della bellezza pura di quella natura. Era davvero uno spettacolo meraviglioso.*<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> The passage is an extract from a lengthy tribute to Neyla that begins with the words "Grazie Neyla" [thank you Neyla].

<sup>108</sup> [Forgetful of everyone, I continued scanning the horizon and finally I saw our mountains appear. I opened my eyes wide so that I could embrace them (the mountains) with my gaze and let them fill me with the pure beauty of that nature. It was really a spectacular scene.]

In this Africa still steeped in ancestral rites and superstitions where time appears to have stood still, and where all appears to be just as it was, the protagonist's change is even more pronounced. There is no question that after his journey inland to this rural, pastoral Africa, far removed from the urban frenzy and chaos of the city, there is a very definite deterioration in Yawo, both physical and emotional. Consequently, it is only with the help and guidance of Neyla that the protagonist can undertake and overcome this final journey to his roots and reclaim his lost identity.

The parallel between his journey inland and his own personal voyage of discovery begins when in approaching an old school "*con le sue aule dalle pareti fatte con i rami di palma e coperte di paglia*" (p.58) [with the classroom walls made of palm branches and covered with straw], memories of his schooldays are triggered off. However, this idyllic image of carefree childhood days is abruptly broken off when incidents of authority tarnished with colonialism<sup>109</sup> prevail. In this flashback one can perceive the beginning of Yawo's acculturation even if at a subliminal level. The passage that follows bears testimony to this process:

*Durante la ricreazione, non si era permesso parlare nel nostro dialetto, bisognava per forza parlare il francese. Per quelli che inavvertitamente se ne scordavano era stato istituito il famigerato 'signal': un guscio di grossa lumaca, traforata con un filo, che il trasgressore era tenuto ad appendersi al collo.*<sup>110</sup> (p.61)

Perhaps the most telling sign of this form of oppression and forced acculturation is how the schoolchildren were forced to deny their very roots by learning that their ancestors were "*Galli con i capelli biondi e gli occhi azzurri*". (pg. 61) [Gauls with blonde hair and blue eyes].

Although these flashbacks to his childhood serve to remind the reader of the control that the French exercised over the local people and how they considered their 'otherness' to be primitive, they have a further function in that the mould for the protagonist's eventual denial of his African roots is set. However, in this phase of the protagonist's journey, the

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<sup>109</sup> Both Komla-Ebri and Yawo originate from ex french colonial countries.

<sup>110</sup> [During recreation, it was prohibited to speak our dialect, we were forced to speak French. For those who inadvertently forgot, the infamous 'signal' had been instituted: the shell of a large snail with a string, which the transgressor was forced to hang around the neck].

scene with his uncle, a respected shamanic healer who has the power to call upon the ancestors, is the turning point in the narrative and with which I have dealt with on pp.45-46.

Togolese culture, like most sub-Saharan cultures, follows a devout belief in the power of departed ancestors who are not only worshipped and feared but are also considered potent forces that continue to share in family life. In this pivotal scene where Neyla falls into a trance, African culture collides headfirst with European culture and Yawo's attempt at applying logic to the situation serves only to increase his unease:

*Continuavo a dirmi che io venivo dall'Europa, che ero studente universitario in uno dei suoi più rinomati atenei, che avevo toccato la tecnologia con mano...e quindi non dovevo farmi condizionare da tutta quella messa in scena, ma nonostante ciò la mia angoscia e il mio disagio crescevano. (p.72)<sup>111</sup>*

The discomfort experienced by the protagonist must be viewed as the ultimate test for the returning son who is reluctant to give in to the call of Africa for fear of betraying his new European identity. Because belief in the departed ancestors is central to being African and is perhaps the strongest reminder of one's African, identity, it is appropriate that the author chooses Neyla (symbolic of a changing Africa) to be the carrier of ancestors' voices. It is only Neyla who can reconcile the protagonist "*con il colore della mia pelle, con la mia gente.*" (Neyla p.92) [with the colour of my skin, with my people], but before doing so he must first acknowledge his denial of his African status.

As the protagonist faces the reality that the return to his roots was "*minando e sgretolando le mie certezze.*" (Neyla p.74) [undermining and demolishing my certainties], so he tries to escape this truth by convincing himself that he is not one of his people, and he does this by differentiating for the first time between himself and them. On the journey home Yawo can no longer hide his frustration and resentment "*Ero esasperato dalla lentezza di quel paese, di quella gente.*" (p.74) [I was furious at the slowness of

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<sup>111</sup> [I kept telling myself that I came from Europe, that I was a student at one of the most renowned universities, that I had touched technology with my own hands... and therefore I should not allow myself to be conditioned by that show, but nevertheless, my anxiety and my discomfort was growing.]

**that** country, of **those** people], and further on when everybody is laughing on the bus, he is irritated by Neyla joining in because he realizes that she is like them:

*Anche tu ridesti e per la prima volta, quel tuo ridere mi fu insopportabile, perché accentuava la tua complicità con **loro** escludendomi.*<sup>112</sup>(p.75)

The trip home from the interior to the city seems interminable to the protagonist whose mental discomfort has now affected his physical state. By the time Yawo and Neyla reach their destination, he is feverish and returns to his father's home. Upon waking he finds his mother asleep on a chair, having watched over him all night. At this point the reader realizes that she too symbolizes Africa. Where Neyla represents a changing Africa, immersed in contradiction and conflict, the mother represents a safe haven, where the returning son can seek shelter and not feel threatened. She is symbolic of 'unchange', remaining steadfast in her unwavering and unconditional love for her son no matter where his journey has taken him. "*Adesso chiudi gli occhi, piccolo mio e dormi, vedrai che domani ti sentirai meglio.*" (p.83) [now close your eyes, my little one and sleep, and you will see that tomorrow you will feel better.] Her comforting presence reassures him and he finally falls asleep '*questa volta senza più incubi.*'(p.83) [this time with no more nightmares]

It is, however, through the death of Neyla that the protagonist is not only able to come to terms with who he is and who he has become, but also to accept Africa with all its frailty in its changing state. As Komla-Ebri says in the preface, the death of Neyla is symbolic of a terminally ill Africa due to her 'fatal attraction' to the west, an attraction brought on by greed, corruption and continuous hardship. Africa is a continent caught at the crossroads between modernity and ancestral traditions, technology and superstition, yet Komla-Ebri suggests that through adversity and death she can rise and be reborn to learn from her mistakes.

The novel ends with the protagonist returning to Europe after having laid Neyla to rest. In a way this burial is symbolic because finally he has laid his past with his broken

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<sup>112</sup>[You also laughed and for the first time your laughter was intolerable, because it accentuated your complicity with them in excluding me.]

identities to rest, and in accepting Africa with all its diversities and conflicts, he ultimately accepts his own African roots. His final words, tinged with sadness but stripped of any anger or resentment, are relevant not only to every migrant but endorse the view that Neyla is Africa and Africa is Neyla.

*La solitudine è quando non ci sei tu. La solitudine è quest'oggi dove già mi manchi ed è questo domani al quale non oso pensare, ove tu mi mancherai ancora di più.*<sup>113</sup>(p. 93)

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<sup>113</sup> [Loneliness is when you are not here. Loneliness is this very day where I already miss you, and it's also this tomorrow which I don't want to think about because I know that I will miss you even more.]

## CHAPTER 4

### Kossi Komla-Ebri: A writer beyond migrant literature.

In the preface of the novel *Neyla*, Pedro Pedroni observes that as result of African migrant literature, European perception of Africans in Africa is undergoing a change. This is especially the case in the narrative of Komla-Ebri who strongly believes that his fundamental role as a writer is to act as a mediator between the two cultures:

*L'ambizione che mi pongo è quella di fare da ponte, da soggetto di mediazione tra una cultura e l'altra[...] Ad esempio, io parlo di abitudini, dialetti , tradizioni, valori che chi legge scopre, perché gli apro una finestra su queste cose. La scrittura diventa così uno spazio virtuale d'incontro. [...] Chi mi legge entra in un altro mondo senza dover spostare.*<sup>114</sup>

In light of this statement, Komla-Ebri succeeds with his narrative in showing the reader that his Africa is not Salgari's<sup>115</sup> Africa often portrayed with “*large rivers, thick forests, foul-smelling marshes from which emanate poisonous smells as well as lions, gorillas, crocodiles, snakes...*” (p.39)<sup>116</sup>, nor does his Africa have the exotic allure portrayed in the novels of Moravia<sup>117</sup> and Goldoni<sup>118</sup>. Similarly, the Africans in Komla-Ebri's narrative are not the stereotypical postcard images of uncivilized, bloodthirsty, spear-wielding tribesmen. While it is true that Komla-Ebri presents the reader with cultural differences that are specifically African in context, his characters are men and women who in their suffering and loneliness find the strength to pick themselves up when they fall. Above all they are men and women who in the name of love find the courage to overcome adversities. It is these very emotions that sensitise the reader and aid in discarding preconceived European interpretations. In light of these statements, this chapter will deal with those stories that are set exclusively in Africa, some of which are completely

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<sup>114</sup> [The desire that I have set myself is to act as a bridge, a subject of mediation between one culture and another. [...] I speak for example, of customs, dialects, traditions, values so that he who reads will discover, because I open a window for him to these things. In this way writing becomes a virtual meeting space. [...] He who reads me can enter into another world without moving.] *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*: Kossi Komla-Ebri “*Apparato Didattico*” pp.164-165

<sup>115</sup> Emilio Salgari, Italian writer who wrote over 200 novels, many of which were based in Africa. ,

<sup>116</sup> Cited by Tundonu Amosu in *The Land of Adventure -The Representation of Africa in Emilio Salgari*, Milano, Edizione Guado, 1988

<sup>117</sup> Between 1975 and 1981 Alberto Moravia travelled through Africa as a correspondent for *Il Corriere della Sera*. Upon his return he published *Lettere dal Sahara*, an account of his perception of Africa.

<sup>118</sup> Luca Goldoni, a writer and journalist published *La Tua Africa* in 1986.

devoid of any western influence. However, to do this it is imperative first to give the reader an understanding of the ‘africanisms’ that Komla-Ebri makes use of in order to achieve this *africanità* in his narrative.

#### **4.1. *The language of orality* – oral tradition. A study of the significance of oraliture and the use of the *griot* and the *Sé Diogbésé* as devices of africanisms.**

In order to discuss Komla-Ebri’s choice of Italian as a medium of communication in his narrative, and more specifically his choice of *oralitura* [oraliture],<sup>119</sup> it is crucial to examine the observations of both Chinua Achebe<sup>120</sup> and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o<sup>121</sup> with regard to the African writer in general.

In 1975 Chinua Achebe, in what was to become a controversial<sup>122</sup> paper entitled “*The African writer and the English Language*”, stated the following:

*Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal which included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it. [ ...] I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings.*<sup>123</sup>

A heated debate ensued between him and Ngũgĩ who argued that because language “*has a dual character*” in that it is “*both a means of communication and a carrier of culture*” it will also incorporate the “*moral, ethical and aesthetic values*” of that particular

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<sup>119</sup> The written form of the spoken word in cultures where orality is the dominant art form.

<sup>120</sup> Prominent Nigerian novelist and poet who uses English in his writings.

<sup>121</sup> Well known Kenyan author and academic who has chosen to write in the Gikuyu language (Niger Congo)

<sup>122</sup> The paper caused an uproar amongst African writers from ex-colonies and the writer Ngũgĩ was his strongest opponent.

<sup>123</sup> Cited by Jenkins, J. 2003 *World Englishes: A resource book for students*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 170-172 extract reprinted from Achebe, C. 1975. *Morning Yeton Creation*. New York: Anchor.



culture. Not only are culture and language according to Ngũgĩ “almost indistinguishable” but “language is [...] inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. [...]”. For this reason Ngũgĩ maintains the view that when the “dominated start singing its virtues” by using the language of the oppressor it is but “the final triumph of a system of domination”<sup>124</sup> While both the above-quoted comments are in reference to the language of French and English colonizers, it is important to understand Komla-Ebri’s position in this regard.

As an ex-patriot from Togo, a former French colony, the French language is, by his own admission, not a language he holds much reverence for, and not the language that accompanies him in his current journey in life (cf. online interview p.20- 22). Like other African writers from former French colonies<sup>125</sup>, Komla-Ebri, the only African writer in Italy from Togo, has chosen to make Italy his home because as the Brazilian novelist, Julio Monteiro Martins stated<sup>126</sup>, writers who have come to Italy ‘hanno fatto una scelta del cuore per l’Italia e per la lingua italiana. [have made a decision from the heart for Italy, and for the Italian language]. In Chapter One, pp.20-22, I referred to Komla-Ebri’s online response to my questions on his choice of language, and observed that the author chooses to write in Italian because it represents freedom and love to him. Italian also affords him the possibility to open a window to his culture and consequently can also bring with it a learning experience.

With regard to Achebe’s and Ngũgĩ’s position concerning the use of the language, Komla-Ebri seems to occupy a sort of ‘thirdspace’. He has chosen not to write in French specifically because it represents “la lingua della ragione, quella imposta” (cf.p.22) [the language of reason, the one forced upon me], and in that he seems to side with Ngũgĩ’. However, he has also chosen not to write in his native Ewe because:

*ai miei tempi non veniva insegnata nelle scuole  
quindi ne ho solo una conoscenza orale. La  
forma scritta ho cercato da solo di impararla*

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<sup>124</sup> All of Ngũgĩ’s quotations in italics above are taken from *World Englishes: A Resource book for students* by Jennifer Jenkins, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.pp. 174-176

<sup>125</sup> Writers such as Mohammed Bouchane and Mohammed Lamsumi (Morocco); Moussa Ba Saidou, Gadji Mbacke and Pap Khouma (Senegal); Amor Dekhis (Algeria) have all settled in Italy.

<sup>126</sup> Monteiro Martins spoke at the second seminar for migrant writers organized by the association of Sagarana in July 2002 and all papers were recorded on line.

*così riesco con fatica a "decifrarla" ma non sono in grado di scriverlo e tanto meno in forma letteraria.*<sup>127</sup>

However, Komla-Ebri's use of Italian in his narrative suggests that by implementing certain language and literary devices, the most significant being oraliture, he succeeds, as Achebe observed, in carrying the weight of his particular African experience.

This 'thirdspace' allows him not only to reach a wider public but also to exercise a certain freedom in his narrative form, specifically because his syntax is not governed by previously acquired colonial constraints. In addition, while this 'thirdspace' is not occupied exclusively by him, it places him in a privileged position by virtue of the freedom of his choice of language, especially if compared to African writers who write in the language of the colonizers,

In Chapter One I noted that the narrative of Komla-Ebri breaks away from the first migrant writers and this is achieved in three significant ways: First, due to his fluency in the language he has never had the need to rely on a co-author to express his thoughts. Secondly, he does not translate from his mother tongue, as after more than 30 years in Italy he does, by his own admission, think and dream in Italian. Italian is for him the language of the present and he considers himself an authentic Italian writer having created within this authenticity his own particular style. Thirdly, although his narrative is fictitious and to a certain degree autobiographical in so far as he writes about a reality that he knows well, it cannot be considered '*letteratura della testimonianza*'. Consequently, Komla-Ebri's narrative approach takes a new direction that sets him a side from the first Italian African migrant writers.

It is significant at this point to note that although Komla-Ebri has chosen Italian as his medium of narrative, he does openly criticize the use of certain words that have lost their original meaning as a direct result of the influx of migrants to Italy. The word '*straniero*' for example, although translated as 'foreigner' is also, as Komla-Ebri says, '*una parola*

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<sup>127</sup> [when I was young it was not taught at school and as a result I only have an oral knowledge of this language. I tried to teach myself the written form and I manage with great difficulty to decipher it, but I am definitely not in a position to write it especially in a literary form.] extract from online interview with Kossi Komla -Ebri by Federica Bellusci 28/11/2007

*piena di pregiudizi*<sup>128</sup> [a word laden with prejudice] because it also defines that which is ‘strano [strange] and therefore by its very definition ‘excludes’. Many critics have suggested that similar words like “*clandestini, irregolari, extracomunitari, vu cumprà*”, which all imply segregation in one form or another, should be abolished from the Italian language as they are all linguistically imperfect terms which are discriminatory towards migrants. Komla-Ebri, suggests rather the ‘*decostruzione*’ of the language, a method that would also include the *decostruzione* of preconceived ideas.<sup>129</sup>

Nevertheless, in choosing Italian (a language of choice) over French (a language imposed) the author allows himself to be more spontaneous and less bound to syntactic structures. Furthermore, by embracing African oral language structures in his Italian narrative (specifically *oralitura*), he further abandons traditional Italian writing techniques.

Komla-Ebri defines *oralità* as:

*l'insieme di tutti i tipi di testimonianza trasmessi verbalmente da un popolo sul suo passato. L'oralità è semplicemente, l' arte del narrare. Spesso si tratta di favole, canzoni, proverbi raccontati oppure cantati dal griot o dagli adulti di una comunità*<sup>130</sup>

The written form of *oralità* is *oralitura*, and this method was first employed by Ahmadou Kourouma<sup>131</sup>, who in introducing ‘africanisms’ in the French language succeeded in creating a writing technique specific to Africa. In an interview with René Lefort and Mauro Rosi, Kourouma stated the following:

*[...] my style had a certain originality stemming from the particular way in which I used the French language. Some readers found this disconcerting. [...] I didn't know how to express myself in any other language [...] so I had to use French to describe Malinke*<sup>132</sup> *people*

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<sup>128</sup> *In questo mondo l'unico avventuriere è il migrante: intervista a Kossi Komla-Ebri, medico e scrittore.* Sabatino Anecchiarico, ‘Migranews’ April 2003.

<sup>129</sup> The author expressed these views in an article he wrote entitled *Il Colore Delle Parole*, part of the publication “*Il mondo in classe*” by Lorenzo Luatti pp.54-55, Ucodep, 2006.

<sup>130</sup> *Oralità: dalla tradizione orale alla scrittura*, K. Komla-Ebri, [www.comune.fe.it/vocidelsilenzio/attikossi.htm](http://www.comune.fe.it/vocidelsilenzio/attikossi.htm) [the coming together of all types of testimonies transferred verbally by a people about their past. Orality is simply the art of narrating. Often this consists of fables, songs, proverbs narrated or sung by the griot or the adults of a community]

<sup>131</sup> Ivory Coast novelist who with the publication of *Soleils des independences* in 1968 radically changed the relationship between the French language and the African writer.

<sup>132</sup> West African people occupying parts of Guinea, Senegal and Ivory Coast.

*and tell stories of Malinke life. Some people have criticized me for “bashing” the French language and giving it a Malinke twist. [...] My characters must be credible and to be credible they must speak in the novel as they speak in their own language.*<sup>133</sup>

In the narrative of Komla-Ebri this approach has had, like Kourouma's first publication 40 years ago, both a positive and negative outcome. On the one hand, Komla-Ebri has successfully recreated in both the novel *Neyla* and in the short stories in *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*, the essence of Africa in an array of scenes, peppered with dusty roads, lush fields, traditional customs, ancestral rites, *griots* and witchdoctors. On the other hand, his need to reproduce *oralità*, with *oralitura*, in the form of short, simple repetitive dialogues, African proverbs and riddles, which undoubtedly constitutes the most significant change to the language, has taken Italian readers (unaccustomed to postcolonial literature) out of their comfort zone.<sup>134</sup>

In reproducing the language of African oral tradition, the African novel has succeeded in fostering a view of the world from the periphery and thus has created an alternative view. However, as Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio observe in a paper entitled *Storytelling and the great narration of global communication*<sup>135</sup>, it has also created ‘an effective otherness within the sphere of dominant communication’, and it is this *otherness* with which Italian readers are uncomfortable.

Komla-Ebri's particular style is largely evident both in the novel *Neyla* and in the short story “*Quando attraverserò il fiume*” from *All' Incrocio dei Sentieri* where Komla-Ebri manoeuvres the Italian language in such a way that it simulates African literary oral storytelling and culture. This is true not only in the rural scenes typical of an African setting but also in the mannerisms of the characters, their body language, actions and in the everyday use of the language.

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<sup>133</sup> Ahmadou Kourouma. *An African novelist's inside story*. <http://www.unesco.org/courier.1999.htm>

<sup>134</sup> Africa and its surrounding has in the past been portrayed through the eyes of Italian writers like Alberto Moravia *A quale Tribu appartieni*(1972) , *Lettere dal Sahara* (1981), *Passeggiate africane* 1987, and Luca Goldoni *la Tua Africa* 1986

<sup>135</sup> Published in *Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere* Terza serie/2000/XIV, Fasano, Schena Editore, pp. 44-61.

In “*Quando attraverserò il fiume*” the narrator/ protagonist returns home from Europe to his remote village in rural Africa and is invited by the elders to accompany his father Fofò, to a tribunal gathering<sup>136</sup>. As the reader accompanies the son of Fofoe into the world of African culture, steeped in superstitions and ancestral rites, the protagonist is not only forced to discard his ‘European’ ways, but also to participate vicariously in traditional rites. Throughout the entire short story the reader is aware of the orality in the written words of Komla-Ebri, emphasized by his constant use of proverbs and of direct speech. The narrative dialogues are structured in accordance with the Togolese sociolinguistic cultural code and as such differ greatly from the Italian cultural code. As Marco Purpura observed, the reader is continuously confronted with “*la ripetizione di formule di saluto, di congedo, di riconoscimento e fiducia, che costituiscono la vera e propria struttura dei racconti di ambientazione africana*”<sup>137</sup> [the repetitive formulas of greetings, taking leave of, acknowledgements and trust, which constitute the real fundamental structure of stories set in Africa]. This structure is strongly evident in the following extract:

*Papà Wade, dopo un lungo silenzio, si girò verso il capo villaggio e disse:*

*“Togbé, ti sono giunte le parole di tuo figlio?”*

*Egli annuì, poi a sua volta girato verso il resto dell’assemblea disse:*

*“Assemblea, avete udite le parole di Yawovi?”, e tutti annuirono.*

*Papà Wade disse girando la testa verso il capo villaggio:*

*“Togbé, senti le mie parole che giungano sulle ali del vento fino al cuore di Yawovi, digli che il consiglio degli anziani è onorato della sua fiducia, ma come non si può chiedere ad un cieco di riconoscere il bianco dal nero, non si può chiedere un giudizio senza dirci veramente cos’è successo fra Nukuku e sua figlia al punto di indurla a pronunciare una così grave*

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<sup>136</sup> The elders have gathered to attend to a particular incident. An old woman called Nukuku lies on her death bed, never having forgiven her daughter for having left her. It is the tribunal’s responsibility to ensure that she retracts the curse she placed on her daughter before she crosses over.

<sup>137</sup> Marco Purpura: Dissertation in the Sociology of Literature. University of Bologna 2003/2004 Title: *L’Immaginario africano/italiano negli scrittori migranti* Chapter 111 : La Narrazione di Komla-Ebri come ponte tra culture p.8

*sentenza. (pp.112-113 'Quando attraverserò il fiume').<sup>138</sup>*

This short passage incorporates various elements that are characteristic of oral tradition identifiable not only in the importance of the spoken word but also in the body language of the elders. Respect for the *capo villaggio* [village chief] is shown in the silence of the elders who gather quietly around in a semi-circle while papà Wadefe as representative of the *Assemblea* chooses his words with great care and reverence. The metaphor depicting papà Wadefe's words as being carried on the wings of the wind not only serves to create an evocative tone but are also further indicative of a rural culture reliant on nature to express itself. Finally, by using the proverb of the symbolic figure of the blind man to shed light on the situation on hand, Komla-Ebri further links his text to expressions of ancient wisdom which still carry weight in rural communities such as the one in question.

In a similar vein Komla-Ebri writes in *Neyla*:

*Agoo! Agoo! Padre dei padri, Agoo a voi, scusate il disturbo. Non vengo a chiamarvi come portatori di cattive notizie, anzi come già sicuramente sapete, perché siete qui sempre presenti nel mormorio del vento, nell'ombra del mezzogiorno e nella penombra della notte...padri dei padri vi chiamo, vi chiamo! Ascoltate questa lieta notizia! Vostro figlio che aveva attraversato "l'acqua che bolle" per andare nei paesi degli yovu è di ritorno. Ed è una grande gioia per i nostri cuori ed è motivo di fierezza per la nostra gente. (p.63)<sup>139</sup>*

The main protagonist's uncle, a '*guaritore*' [healer], in welcoming his nephew back home, calls upon the ancestors with the expression "Agoo" which in Ewe means

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<sup>138</sup> [After a long silence Papà Wadefe turned to the village chief and said:

"Togbè, have your son's words reached you?"

He nodded and in turn, addressing the assembly said:

"Assembly, have you heard the words of Yawovi? to which everybody nodded.

Turning to the village Chief Papà Wadefe said:

"Togbè, hear my words that reach the heart of Yawovi from the wings of the wind, tell him that the Council of the Elders is honoured by his trust, but in the same way that one cannot ask a blind man to distinguish between black and white, one cannot ask for judgment without him telling us exactly what happened between Nukuku and her daughter that made her utter such a grave sentence".]

<sup>139</sup> [Agoo! Agoo! Father of fathers. Agoo to you all. I apologize if I disturb you. I am not calling you as a bringer of bad news, in fact, as you already surely know, because you are always present in the murmur of the wind, in the shadow of midday and in the twilight ...Father of fathers I call you, I call you! Hear this happy news. Your son who has crossed "the boiling water" to go to the land of the Yovu has returned. And there is great joy in our hearts and there is a reason for our people to be proud]

“excuse me’ or ‘silence’. It is interesting to note that an occasion such as this one cannot be rightfully celebrated without the acknowledgement and support of the ancestral gods, and their power is not to be underestimated for they are everywhere *‘nel mormorio del vento, nell’ombra del mezzogiorno e nella penombra della notte’*. [In the whispering of the wind, in the shadow of midday and in the twilight]. As in the previous passage metaphors are used to evoke images suggestive of a culture embedded in rural Africa i.e the ocean is depicted as *“acqua che bolle”*

Komla-Ebri’s use of African proverbs and sayings, somewhat exaggerated in *“Quando attraverserò il fiume”*, is another means through which the form of African oral tradition is maintained. Although proverbs appear in rich abundance in most African cultures and are a common device in postcolonial literature, their importance is not to be taken lightly insofar as they provide a glimpse into the thoughts and wisdom of the past. Interestingly, the author does not search for the Italian equivalent of the proverb, but merely translates it as it is uttered in the Ewe language. The effectiveness of this procedure lies not only in the visual aspect of imagery and expressions foreign to the European mind, but also in the acknowledgment that in representing universal truths, proverbs are a self-evident authority. Komla-Ebri mostly uses proverbs with metaphorical comparisons which are indicative of his culture as in the following examples:

*“Quando la memoria va in cerca di legna per riscaldarsi dalla nostalgia prende solo i ceppi più belli...”* (p.107) [when memory goes in search of wood to warm itself against nostalgia, it takes back with it only the most beautiful logs.]

*“Un tronco di legno anche se rimane per anni nel fiume, non diventa mai un coccodrillo”* (p.108) [a log can remain in a river for many years but it will never become a crocodile]. Both the above proverbs relate to nature, emphasizing that both the botanical and animal world are close to the daily experiences of people living in rural Africa: wood for fire, crocodiles in the river.

*Abra da brava figlia era sempre stata ubbidiente,  
perché sapeva che la barba non può insegnare*

*alle ciglia, visto che anche se è più lunga o più grigia, ha visto il giorno dopo di loro.*<sup>140</sup>(p.113).

All three of the above proverbs use a rich and picturesque language, which not only embellishes the speech but contains obvious insight. As is noted in this particular short story, a proverb can be found for almost every conceivable form of human behaviour. Both the first and second proverb quoted, are associated with visual symbols pertaining to nature. While the first one introduces the story and sets the tone, allowing the author to reminisce his African past, the second one is suggestive of the issue of identity with which I have already dealt. The third proverb is a clever example of how respect is still afforded to the elderly and to parents in rural Africa notwithstanding conflicting circumstances. All three proverbs are indicative not only of an oral non-literary tradition but go a long way in providing an understanding of the way of life in Africa and thinking.

In Chapter One, I stated that literary critics do not consider migrant writers “*Italian writers in their ‘purist’ form.*” and that the Italian utilized “*with all its expressions, nuances, grammar and orality is not regarded as enhancing the language but rather is seen as a corruption or distortion of the lingua viva*” (p.19) Although Komla-Ebri has proved with the use of oraliture that he succeeds effectively in transferring africanisms into his narrative, his art of narration is by no means limited to this type of device. There are many instances, particularly in the novel *Neyla* where the author succeeds in rendering a literature that is both poetic and grammatically flawless.<sup>141</sup> It is significant that in recalling the background of his own childhood<sup>142</sup>, Komla-Ebri has retrieved certain striking and picturesque images, which have given rise to some of his most lyrical prose. The text that follows, to which the English translation does not do justice, not only illustrates this point, but confirms Komla-Ebri’s command and mastery of the Italian language:

*I ragazzi si arrampicavano sui rami degli alberi ricurvi sul fiume, come sudditi ossequiosi per fargli la riverenza, e poi si tuffavano giù rannicchiati, incuranti dei grossi sassi scivolosi*

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<sup>140</sup> [Abra, like a good daughter had always been obedient, because she knew that the beard cannot teach the eyelash because even if it is longer and more grey it saw the light of day after it].

<sup>141</sup> The protagonist delivers a powerful tribute to Neyla on pp.44-46 and p.92, some of which I have quoted on Chapter 2 p.44 and Chapter 3 p.58.

<sup>142</sup> The author was born in a rural village in Togo and spent his childhood years there.



*che pavimentavano il letto. Intanto noi strappavamo le felci, per raccogliere la loro polvere giallognola e farne cosmetici per il viso. A volte facevamo a gara con i ramoscelli che adagiavano sull'acqua, dove si attingeva quella da bere, poi correvamo lungo il fiume per seguirne le evoluzioni. Essi si lasciavano trascinare con indolenza poi venivano come aspirati dai frizzanti vortici, tuffandosi a metà per poi risorgere, trionfalmente, come annaspando, per essere poi allontanati dal fiume, portando con loro i nostri sogni di viaggi e di avventure.<sup>143</sup>(p.76)*

### **The *griot*: An essential part of oraliture.**

Komla-Ebri, like Moussa Ba and other African writers, has introduced the figure of the *griot* in his narrative primarily because as the keeper of history the *griot* is an essential figure in African tradition. The use of the *griot*, who in most African tribes is an elderly person, highly respected and feared for his wisdom and talent with words, also enables the people of a village to be brought together and exchange knowledge face to face. The *griot's* fundamental role is not only to form a tangible link to the past, but also to touch the listeners with stories and facts about who they are as a people.

More significantly, the use of the *griot* is also a stepping-stone to orality, which in Afro-Italian literature is its single most distinguishing feature. In support of this Komla-Ebri states that his aim in his narrative is to:

*effettuare un tono 'orale' che insinua una presenza dalla parte del parlante, dell'autore stesso, e che quindi cerca volutamente di rompere la barriera creata dalla pagina scritta e*

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<sup>143</sup> [The boys would climb the branches of trees that were bent over the river like respectful subjects curtsying to it in reverence, and then they would curl up and dive in, unconcerned with the big, slippery rocks that paved the bed of the river. In the meanwhile, we would tear out ferns and gather their yellowish powder and improvise cosmetics for our faces. Sometimes we would compete with little branches that we would place with care on to the water, there where we would draw our drinking water. Then we would run along the river and follow their course. They would allow themselves to be dragged lazily and then they would be sucked in by the water's sparkling swirls, diving in half way only to re-emerge triumphant, as if trying to keep their heads above water, and then the river would take them away from us, taking with them our dreams of travels and adventures.]

*cancellare l'assenza dell'autore e la distanza tra autore e lettore.*<sup>144</sup>

In the short story “Yévi-il-Ragno” (Yévi-the Spider) in *All’Incrocio del Sentieri* the author skilfully embodies the role of the *griot* character, and light-heartedly narrates the plight of the migrant in the form of a western fable. By using this mythic tale Komla-Ebri does not offer an argument for or against, but simply brings out into the open various issues that need to be considered. To simulate the *griot* he creates the impression that the people from the village gather around listening carefully to his words, and thus narrows the gap between speaker and listener: “*Gente, udite la mia favola! Ben venga la tua favola!*”(p.62) [People, come hear my story! We welcome your story!].

The story of Yévi-il-Ragno, although similar to countless other fables, as can be seen from the introduction that follows, carries with it a new message adapted by the author to a new set of circumstances.

*La mia favola parte sul filo del tempo, corre...corre...rimbalza fra monti, fiumi, valli e cade su Yévi-il-Ragno, Yévi –Pancia-Grossa: il ragno nero. Erano i tempi della grande carestia. Nella stagione secca il sole aveva prosciugato i fiumi, i torrenti, e la terra si era screpolata: neanche un filo d'erba. I granai del villaggio si svuotavano. i cuori s'inaridivano. Gli uomini e gli animali, che allora vivevano in armonia, decisero di comune accordo di inviare uno di loro in cerca di cibo. Yévi-il ragno, Yévi-pancia-grossa, noto per il suo coraggio e la sua astuzia, si offrì volontario. (p. 62)*<sup>145</sup>.

## **The Sé, Diogbése in African culture and in the narrative of Komla-Ebri**

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<sup>144</sup> Cited in *Le voci africane nella letteratura della migrazione*. James Walker, 2004 [www.eksetra.net](http://www.eksetra.net). [create an ‘oral’ tone that insinuates a presence on the part of the speaker, and of the author, and therefore he deliberately tries to break down the barrier created by the written page and cancel the absence of the author and the distance between author and reader.]

<sup>145</sup> [My story departs on the thread of time, it runs...it runs... it bounces back and forth on hills, rivers, valleys, and falls on Yévi-the spider, Yévi-fat-tummy: the black spider. It was the time of the great famine. During the dry season the sun had dried up the rivers, the streams, and the earth had cracked: not even a blade of grass. The granaries of the villages were becoming empty. The hearts of men were becoming barren. The men and the animals who during that time were living in harmony decided together to send one of their own in search of food. Yévi-the-spider, Yévi-fat tummy, known for his courage and his cunning volunteered to go.]

While all the characters that stand at the crossroads in Komla-Ebri's narrative, are driven there by their need to be true to who they are, their ultimate decision is motivated by what Komla-Ebri calls the 'Sé, Diogbésé'<sup>146</sup> [destiny], an inherent part of African culture. When Abra in "*Abra: All'incrocio dei sentieri*" realises that she cannot go and meet her beloved, she resigns herself to her fate because "*Il Sé, Diogbésé, era crudele. Sé' non fa sconti, non ha pietà, è ineluttabile.*"(p.79) [The Sé, Diogbésé [destiny] was cruel, it doesn't make allowances, it has no pity, it is unavoidable]. However, later, Abra chooses to go to her lover thanks to her relatives and her friend who seems to personify destiny '*...cara amica mia, capitavi sempre come un'inviata del destino tutte le volte che avevo bisogno di aiuto*" (p.104) [my dear friend, you always appeared as if sent by destiny, each time that I needed help]. Likewise, her decision to leave is justified with the words -"*lui è nel mio destino*" (p.105) [he is in my destiny].

Similarly, in "*Vado a Casa*", after endless attempts to return home, Yao finally gives in to his Sé- "*Yao a quel punto rinunciò a discutere. Si vede che era il destino a volere così*" (p.29) [At that point Yao stopped arguing. Fate must have wanted it to go thus.] In "*Due Scatole Di Fiammiferi*" it is Togbé's destiny that brings him to Italy – "*Nessuno allora sapeva che il destino l'avrebbe portato a varcare l'oceano...egli avrebbe incontrato l'amore della sua vita e ...la morte.*"(p.36) [Nobody then knew that destiny would have made him cross the ocean...that he would have met the love of his life and...death.] In "*Quando Attraverserò Il Fiume*", Fofò's son gives up trying to convince the dying woman to retract her curse because he was "*sconfitto e rassegnato al destino*" (p.116) [defeated and resigned to fate]. In "*La Borsa di Studio*", the doctor who inadvertently lets Foé know about their act of charity is described as "*ignaro strumento del destino.*"(p.61) [ignorant instrument of destiny].

The acceptance of one's fate in African culture is not viewed as defeatist nor is it seen as a sign of weakness. In the notes included in the appendix of *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*, Komla-Ebri was asked why, notwithstanding the overwhelming misery and poverty that has stricken Africa, the people still find it in themselves to smile. He gave the following explanation:

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<sup>146</sup> *destiny* in Ewe, one of the languages spoken in Togo

*Là le persone lottano ma senza quell'accanimento sistematico che c'è in occidente nel voler dividere sempre il bene dal male. La gente accetta il bene sapendo che comporta un certo male; accetta il male sapendo che il bene e il male vanno insieme, inscindibili, non sempre nettamente contrapposti. Questa consapevolezza aiuta a superare i momenti difficili.*<sup>147</sup>

While in theory this philosophy can assist an individual in enduring even the worst hardships, it does open itself to strong criticism. Many African countries have proved with their traditional mindsets that if a belief in fatalism becomes the dominant credo of a group, it can have tragic and destructive real-life outcomes, consequences that will lead to poverty, injustice and a breakdown of social order.

#### **4.2 The African Stories: “*Abra: all’incrocio dei sentieri*”, “*Il tuono*”, “*Quando attraverserò il fiume*”.**

There is in Komla Ebri’s narrative a constant play between a rural Africa, and a more urban Africa in the process of transformation. In the novel *Neyla*, the protagonist’s journey from the city to the *entroterra* [inland] is especially indicative of this process as is shown in the passages that follow:

*Ci apriamo un passaggio fra tutta quella marea di venditrici di pane, spiedini, akpan, di acqua fresca in bacinelle o in secchi con ghiaccio, di ghiaccio in sacchetti di plastica che bastava bucare in un angolo per dissetarsi. Tutta questa gente girava spingendosi contro le finestre dei taxi per vendere ai passeggeri. (p.40)*<sup>148</sup>

This portrayal of a city desperate to survive within a western framework is in stark contrast with the protagonist’s first impression of his surroundings as he approaches his

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<sup>147</sup> [there, people struggle without that systematic fury so typical of the western world that needs to divide good and bad. People accept the good knowing that it will bring with it a certain amount of bad; they accept the bad knowing that good and bad live together inseparably, and are not always exact opposites. This awareness helps them to overcome difficult moments.] *All’Incrocio dei Sentieri*. Kossi Komla-Ebri, EMI, Bologna, 2002 Apparato didattico di Giovanna Stanganella, “*Identità trasverse*” p.g.162

<sup>148</sup> [We pushed our way through a sea of vendors of bread, kebabs, *akpan*, fresh water kept in basins or in buckets with ice, ice in plastic packets that one simply had to bite the edge off in order to quench one’s thirst. All these people moved, pushing themselves against the windows of the taxis in the hope of selling to the passengers]

destination after hours of travel. It is here, far from the promises of the city and vices associated with its urban life, that another Africa uncontaminated by the lures of money and greed lives on. This is a lush, green Africa, where the reader discovers adults and children bathing naked in streams without any form of malice and where the wisdom of the elders still carries respect and reverence.

*La strada come un serpente nero luccicante, incominciò a salire, curvare, poi scendere, mentre all'orizzonte un fumo tremolante si innalzava dall'asfalto dando a tratti l'illusione di chiazze d'olio. Dimentico di tutti, continuai a scrutare l'orizzonte ed infine vidi apparire i nostri monti. Sbarrai gli occhi per meglio abbracciarli con lo sguardo e riempirmi di bellezza pura di quella natura. Era davvero uno spettacolo meraviglioso: montagne coperte da alberi fitti come verdi capelli crespi ed arruffati con in sommità un'aureola di nebbia. (p 57)<sup>149</sup>*

In section 4.2 and 4.3 I will focus on those stories that portray these two Africas. Equally important are the characters that inhabit the two Africas as they are not only representative of tradition and modernity, but also of human behaviour regardless of its setting.

It would be one-dimensional to think of the protagonist in Komla-Ebri's narrative as simply one who migrates from a poverty-stricken African country to a European first-world country in search of a better life. In fact, it has already been established that the 'io-migrante' in the narrative of Komla-Ebri is born as a result of various forces over which in many instances the protagonist has no or little control (cf. The *se diogbésé* pp.75-76). In light of this statement, it is with the three exclusively African stories that the narrative of, Komla-Ebri becomes a "poetica per l'Uomo, il disperatamente umano".<sup>150</sup> [poetic expression of Man, portrayed as desperately human].

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<sup>149</sup> [Like a black, shiny serpent the road began to rise, turn and then drop, whilst on the horizon a quivering smoke rose from the asphalt giving at intervals the illusion of patches of oil. Forgetting everybody I continued to scrutinize the horizon and finally I saw our mountains appear. I opened my eyes wide to take them all in and to fill me with the pure beauty of that nature. It was truly a marvelous view: mountains covered with thick trees like green, ruffled, crinkled hair and on their peak a halo of fog.]

<sup>150</sup> Intervista a Kossi Komla-Ebri: A. Bertello. *La banalità del razzismo* Scrittori Migranti. [http://www.kossi-komlaebri.net/intervista\\_a\\_bertello\\_casa-della-cultura.php](http://www.kossi-komlaebri.net/intervista_a_bertello_casa-della-cultura.php). Accessed 05 July 2008.

In “*Abra: all’incrocio dei sentieri*” “*Il tuono*” and “*Quando attraverserò il fiume*”, Komla-Ebri explores human behaviour and breaks away momentarily from the postcolonial issues that are prevalent in all his narratives. What is significant is that all three short stories are set exclusively in Africa and as such allow the author to go beyond the confines of migrant literature. The usual themes associated with migrant literature such as otherness, unbelonging and alienation find no place here, nor are they a point of discussion. Gone too, are the underlying themes that are suggestive of postcolonial literature. In these stories, devoid of western nuances, the author tells of ordinary men and women who are challenged and tested in life’s continuous journey. Pivotal to the collection of short stories in *All’Incrocio Dei Sentieri* is the story “*Abra: All’incrocio dei sentieri*”, the importance of which cannot be underestimated as it also determines the title choice for Komla-Ebri’s compilation.

The story “*Abra: All’incrocio dei sentieri*” , is not only the longest short story in the collection but is also a point of reference for most of the protagonists from other stories as they gather in the village of Ablomé for a family reunion. Set in this tranquil village in Togo, this story, with its dusty, winding roads, open fields and bamboo, mud huts, exemplifies a typical, rural African location. It is the story of Abra, a young girl whose *Se Diogbésé* [destiny] has brought her to the crossroads and she is about to embark on a journey that will change her forever. The only child of a bitter, resentful woman, whose husband had abandoned her, Abra decides, after succumbing for years to her mother’s emotional abuse, to leave her village to be with the man she loves, even if it is against her mother’s wishes. In recalling her childhood in this simple African setting, rendered somewhat idyllic by memory and the passing of time, Abra makes the reader aware that within the community there exists an organised hierarchy where respect for the elders of the family is of paramount importance, and where the spirits of the ancestors are not to be underestimated. In the passage that follows Abra explains to the reader what normally would take place after the male elders had accepted a marriage proposal on behalf of one of their female relatives.

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*Dopo l'accettazione della dote di fidanzamento, i saggi della famiglia avrebbero pregato gli spiriti degli antenati nel cortile. Tutti si sarebbero messi in semicerchio: zio Adonko come cerimoniere, assistito dallo zio Yawovi e dallo zio Fofué come accolti portatori delle bevande, si sarebbero tolti le scarpe prima di avanzare di qualche passo in avanti per non profanare quel pezzo di terra che sarebbe poi diventato sacro ed entrare con i piedi nudi in simbiosi con gli spiriti. (pp.98-99)<sup>151</sup>*

Notwithstanding the fact that Abra grew up without a father, the memories of her childhood remain carefree and positive: *“Era stata davvero una bella infanzia, con il suo alone e la sua brezza inebriante di magia, in cui tutto era possibile,”* (p.77) [It had been really a wonderful childhood, with its glow and inebriating breeze of magic in which everything was possible]. Her attitude suggests that thanks to her upbringing and to the close bond she still has with her uncle Yawovi and other relatives, the baggage generally associated with unresolved childhood issues is minimized. This subtle reference on the part of the author is intended to underline the sense of community and extended family that is still to some extent prevalent amongst African people primarily in rural areas.

In reminiscing about her past, the narrator transports the reader into the magical playground of the child filled with laughter and endless days of sun. And, while the eating of *“grossi vermicciattoli biancastri che infilzavamo insieme a piccole cavalette e che arrostitiamo sulla brace”* (p 76) [big, whitish worms that we skewered together with small grasshoppers and roasted on the fire], and the catching of *“topi di bosco”* (p.76) [wood rats] may not suit everyone's palate, the games the children play clearly suggest that there are more similarities than differences between African and European children - *“giocavamo a marito e moglie”* (p.76) [we played husband and wife] *“giocavamo a telefono con scatole vuote collegate da fili”* (p.77) [we played telephone with boxes connected by wires]. This very contagious enthusiasm of children playing in streams,

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<sup>151</sup> [After having accepted the engagement dowry, the wise of the family would have prayed to the spirits of the ancestors in the courtyard. They all would have formed a semi-circle: uncle Adonko, the master of ceremonies, assisted by uncle Yawovi and uncle Fofué who were the acolyte bearers of drink, would all have removed their shoes before stepping forward so as not to desecrate that piece of ground that would later become sacred, thereby entering barefoot in harmony with the spirits.]

and running barefoot and carefree in woods and open fields, not only accentuates the practise of oneness with nature, innate in rural Africa, but also reminds one how this activity, once considered savage and uncivilised by the west, is now a highly sought after remedial cure for city related ailments.

Due to the fact that all the characters in the collection *All'Incrocio Dei Sentieri* meet up in the short story, "Abra: All'incrocio dei sentieri", it bonds with all the stories and provides not only continuity but also adds more definition to certain marginal characters. The reader learns for example, that the old woman, Nukuku, a resentful, dislikeable figure in "Quando attraverserò il fiume", is really a desperate woman whose spirit was not only crushed by her husband's abandonment, but also by the people's malicious scorn of her misfortune. Abra, her daughter, in experiencing the love of a man for the first time, realises that her mother's bitterness stems from deep-rooted loneliness and humiliation:

*Capivo ora che assaporavo la dolce potenza dell'amore che travolgeva tutto il mio essere, quanto crudele doveva essere stata per lei la solitudine del giaciglio vuoto, le parole bisbigliate dietro le spalle. (p.104)<sup>152</sup>*

In "La Ricchezza del Povero", Fofué's wife plays very much a secondary role, yet the reader is aware of her unwavering support to her husband. In "Abra", the reader finds out that Fofué's wife is a teacher and that her background is different from the rest of them. Notwithstanding the fact that she is not 'una delle nostre parti' (p. 83) [one from our parts], she has proved to be a good woman and 'ospitato addirittura in casa, come era usanza da noi, i nipoti del marito, vestendoli, nutrendoli e mandandoli a scuola.' (p. 83) [had even taken in, as is our custom, her husband's nephews, clothing them, feeding them and sending them to school].

Also making an appearance in "Abra: All'incrocio dei sentieri" is Papà Wadefe who had been introduced to the reader in "Quando attraverserò il fiume" as one of the village elders. In "Abra" his importance in the hierarchy of the village is further established when he takes on the role of the *griot*. In reminiscing about her lost youth, Abra recounts how

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<sup>152</sup> [I understood now that I was tasting the sweet power of love that was sweeping away my total being, just how cruel her loneliness must have been in the empty straw bed, the whispered words behind her back...].



the children and adults of the village would gather in a semicircle around him and listen to *“le sue storie meravigliose, fantastiche e a volte terribili, dove il furbo ragno ‘Yévi, con la sua panciona ne faceva di tutti i colori.”*(p.77) [his marvellous, fantastic and sometimes terrible stories, where ‘Yevi’ the cunning spider with his huge belly would get up to all sorts of mischief].

In the short story *‘Il Tuono’* [The Thunder] in *All’Incrocio dei Sentieri*, the main character Komla’s decision to leave his hometown, is brought about by a series of incidents. These not only serve to show how the inconsistent and cowardly behaviour of a community can lead to another person’s destruction, but also highlight the power of unity within the family, a highly valued concept and an integral part not only of the African rural family but also of the Italian family.

In a show of extreme courage, Komla, a humble, dedicated family man, with no ambition or aspiration to any form of power, defends and saves, his village from a vicious attack by the neighbouring Ashanti tribe. After burying their king and the rest of the dead, the village elders unanimously elect Komla as their new leader and give him the name Ebri, which in Ewe means ‘thunder’. An unassuming and much respected leader, Ebri serves his community with devotion for many years.

One day his son Yawovi, is wrongfully accused of causing the death of a man and notwithstanding the fact that there is no proof, the community, gripped by a fear that makes men *“irragionevoli e ciechi”* (p.132) [unreasonable and blind] banishes him from the village. Ebri, greatly saddened by the lack of trust afforded him by his community and aware that there are hidden forces attempting to disparage his character, asks to be dethroned with the words *“Se mio figlio, carne della mia carne, deve essere strappato a questa terra allora è giusto che io lo segua piuttosto che strapparlo dalla mia carne!”* (p.135) [If my son, blood of my blood, must be torn from this land, then it is right that I follow him rather than he be torn from my life].

The short story ends with the words *“Ebri, sua moglie e i suoi figli preserò il sentiero dell’esilio per tutta la vita.”* (p.136) [Ebri, his wife and children took the path of eternal exile] and the reader realizes that this act of courage and of self-banishment involves

the same greatness that had driven Ebri to defend his land and people in the first place. While it is apparent that the central theme of this story is the representation of the principles and politics associated with power, Komla-Ebri's objective is to put the spotlight on a person's '*coerenza interna che non vacilla né si lascia incantare dagli abbagli di un potere senza più valore.*'(p.180 '*Apparato Didattico*' di Giovanna Stanganello in *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*). [inner coherence that does not waver nor allow itself to be spellbound by the dazzle of a power that no longer has value].

In my view, it is through occasions such as these that the author separates himself from the migrant literary category, and his need to be heard and read simply as a writer and not a 'migrant' writer becomes apparent. Komla-Ebri is resolute in portraying characters that embody through their life experiences, values and expectations common to all.

In "*Quando attraverserò il fiume*" the reader accompanies Fofué and his son to the village of Ablomé where a community awaits the death of the old woman Nukuku. Here the people of the village anxiously await the forgiveness of a dying, bitter woman for a lost daughter so as to avoid further tragic consequences (cf. ch.4, pp.69-70). Set in rural Togo, this short story is perhaps the most African of all the stories with an abundance of proverbs, greetings and rites characteristic of rural Africa. As already discussed in 4.1, African practices and traditions are plentiful in many of Komla-Ebri's stories and serve to create an effective background as the emotions of the protagonists are exposed. Repetitive greetings with fellow travellers, the majority of whom are strangers, are the order of the day and it is significant to note that repetition in Komla-Ebri's narrative is not a device used when there is no variation, but a ritual that suggests the very essence of orality. This is evident throughout their journey to Nukuku's village where the protagonists in "*Quando attraverserò il fiume*" exchange continuous repetitive greetings:

"Si è fatto giorno". "Si è fatto giorno". "*Ti sei svegliato?*" "*E i bambini?*" "*E la moglie?*" "*il marito?*" "*E il papà?*" "*E il lavoro?*" p.109).<sup>153</sup>

As village elders, both Papà Wadefe and Togbé and the other elders are respected for their life experience and wisdom and are highly regarded because "*Gli anziani sono la*

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<sup>153</sup> ["Day has come" "Day has come". "You have awakened?" "And how are the children?" " And how is the wife?" "And how is the husband?" And how is your father? "And how is the work?"]

*memoria storica dei nostri villaggi*<sup>154</sup> [The elderly are the historical memory of our villages]. Similarly, Yawo's uncle in *Neyla*, (cf.ch.2, p.46 and ch.3, p.60) as a healer and because of his close connection to nature and the spiritual world, serves as mediator between deceased ancestors and living family members. These traditions and cultures are manifested in Komla-Ebri's narrative not only in the use of the spoken language (interspersed with proverbs and metaphors), but also through body language. This aspect is clearly illustrated in the following extract in "*Quando attraverserò il fiume*":

*Dopo essermi sciacquato la bocca mi recai da mio padre, e con un mezzo inchino del corpo gli presentai il mio saluto con la mano destra tesa verso di lui e la mano sinistra a reggere il gomito dell'avambraccio destro: (p.108)*<sup>155</sup>

These symbolic gestures echo an episode in *Neyla* where Yawo, having left the bustling chaos of the city, and having reached his destination on his journey inland is greeted by his uncle and enters a world that seems to have stood still in time:

*All'ingresso del cortile, vidi mio zio aspettarci... Ci aspettava come voleva la tradizione, con ai piedi una mezza zucca riempita d'acqua e farina di mais, mentre il figlio teneva in mano una bottiglia di sodabi (grappa di vino di palma) e una gallina rossa. ( Neyla pp 62-63)*<sup>156</sup>

The author's attention to detail is intended not only to create an African setting but also to make the reader aware of different cultural norms and to encourage one to develop greater respect and tolerance for other cultures. It is only by bridging the two cultures that narrow-mindedness, as exhibited by Fofoe's white Italian wife in "*Mal di...*" in the episode that follows, can be defeated:

*Non sapevo più come comportarmi. Mia cognata mi faceva sentire un'intrusa, mi guardava con aria sospettosa, perché, per educazione, non la guardavo negli occhi quando le parlavo e la sentii un giorno parlare con una sua amica al telefono dandomi della sorniona e dell'ipocrità. (p. 11)*<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> *Quando attraverserò il Fiume* p. 110

<sup>155</sup> [After having rinsed my mouth I went to my father, and with a slight bow I greeted him, my right hand extended towards him whilst my left hand supported the elbow of the right arm]

<sup>156</sup> [ At the entrance of the courtyard I saw my uncle waiting for us...He was waiting for us as tradition dictated him to: Half a pumpkin filled with water and corn flour stood at his feet, whilst his son held in his hands a bottle of *sodabi* (the grappa of palm wine ) and a red chicken].

<sup>157</sup> [ Mia cognata mi faceva sentire un'intrusa"] I no longer knew how to act. My sister-in-law made me feel like an intruder. She would watch me suspiciously because out of respect I would not look her in the eyes when I spoke to her and I heard her once say to a friend on the telephone that I was sneaky and a hypocrite.]

Neatly interwoven with the story of the dying Nukuku in “*Quando attraverserò il fiume*” is the portrayal of the coming of age of a returning son and his acceptance into the circle of respected elders. Although the son of Fofué has come home from Europe to see his family, the author does not draw attention to this fact as he does in the novel *Neyla*. The essence of this story is the power of the spoken word with which I have dealt extensively in chapter 4.1 and in a culture where the written word does not exist, Komla-Ebri succeeds in conveying to the readers an African story as told by an African.

#### **4.3 The African Stories in a postcolonial context: “*La Ricchezza del Povero*,” and “*La Manif*”**

In a similar vein, set exclusively in Africa and therefore transcending the migrant literature category, are the two short stories “*La ricchezza del povero*” and “*La Manif*”. They do however differ from the short stories discussed in 4.2 in that both involve a very definite postcolonial framework.

The short story “*La Ricchezza del Povero*” [The Wealth of the Poor] in *All’Incroccio dei Sentieri* is another example of how the author makes use of biographical snippets as a medium to his fiction. In this story, the protagonist Foè is a devout Catholic and a teacher at a Catholic Mission somewhere in Africa where “*Per il suo credo aveva lavorato tanti mesi per la missione, senza prendere un franco. Più di una volta lo stipendio giungeva con tre-quattro mesi di ritardo.*” (p.55) [Because of his faith, he had worked many months for the mission without earning a single franc. On more than one occasion the salary would arrive three or four months late.]

In an online interview<sup>158</sup> with Komla-Ebri I asked him about his family in Togo and the extract that follows clearly shows how his parent’s personal experiences form the frame around this particular story:

*I miei genitori ora in pensione erano insegnanti alla missione Cattolica (mal pagati e talvolta non pagati: lavoravano per la Gloria dei Dio). Cattolici praticanti convinti ...che di fronte a qualunque difficoltà si affidano alla preghiera che in casa si faceva tutti insieme davanti*

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<sup>158</sup> December 14, 2007

*all'altare del 'cuor sacro di gesù' ogni giorno alla mattina e alla sera prima di ogni pasto.*<sup>159</sup>

Set in the dusty streets of a city in Togo, the headquarters of a Catholic mission station, Komla-Ebri narrates the story of Foè. Highly respected by his colleagues, Foè will face a situation that will put his personal integrity at stake. Having earned himself the title "*l'incorruttibile*" [the incorruptible] in his thirty years of dedicated service, Foé finds himself at loggerheads with the temporary director Fada<sup>160</sup> Tukai. The latter, a young priest, "*appena sfornato dal seminario diocesano*" (p.50) [just churned out of the diocesan seminary], is described as a small, vain and arrogant man, whose vocation to the church is nothing more than "*un'occasione irrinunciabile di promozione sociale*" (p.50) [an irresistible opportunity for social advancement]. However, a seemingly insignificant incident sets off a chain of events that challenge Foè's integrity.

Foè informs his colleagues that the mission has finally purchased *Vespe* scooters to replace their old unreliable ones. While admiring the new arrivals, Foè remembers how the teachers would travel for miles on slippery paths in the pouring rain to reach the schools. And how when travelling inland "*percorrevano, rompendosi la schiena, 200-250 chilometri e più in una giornata.*" (p.52) [they would cover 200-250 kilometres a day, their backs breaking]. However, their happiness is short-lived when Fada Tukai arrogantly reprimands them, and orders Foè to return the motorbike keys. Humiliated and hurt that a priest young enough to be his son has no regard for his years of dedication to the mission and treats him with condescension, Foè stands his ground and a physical fight ensues. Although much younger, the priest is no match for Foè and he soon backs off. Foè, placing the keys on their hanger, leaves the mission with the words "*Bastava chiederle con educazione*" (p. 54) [All you had to do was ask for them politely]. That evening he makes the decision to resign from the Mission notwithstanding the fact that he is a few years away from retirement, because as he explains to his wife "*un uomo può concedere tutto, tranne la sua dignità. La dignità è l'unica ricchezza*

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<sup>159</sup> [My parents, now retired, were both teachers at the Catholic mission (badly paid and sometimes not paid at all: they would work for the glory of God). Devout practicing Catholics who when faced with any difficulty would entrust it to prayer, which we would all do at home before the altar of "Jesus of the sacred heart" each day, morning and evening before each meal.]

<sup>160</sup> "Father"

*dell'povero* (p.57) [a man can concede everything except his dignity. Dignity is the sole wealth of the poor].

Of particular interest in this short story is the author's ability to observe and to translate his observations into detailed descriptions. I refer here in particular to Komla-Ebri's portrayal of religious paraphernalia, a pervasive part of popular Catholic piety that shapes the religious lives of a large number of Catholics. A collection of cheap, garishly coloured plaster and plastic statues and portraits not only overflow in the protagonist's home, but are also a tongue-in-cheek reminder of religious beliefs that have been enforced on cultures previously foreign to them:

*Sulla parete di fronte, una foto del papa, con dedica di benedizione, era a lato di quella del loro matrimonio, quella del vescovo e diversi ritratti del Cristo. Il suo preferito era senza dubbio quello del Cristo in croce, con la corona di spine. A seconda dell'angolazione in cui lo si vedeva, apriva gli occhi stralunati al cielo, oppure li chiudeva quasi ammiccando, con gocce di sangue che colavano dalla fronte ferita. Sulla terza parete un altare sospeso, coperto da un drappo rosso polveroso, ornato di vecchi fiori di plastica e una candela, sosteneva il ritratto del Sacro cuore (sic). Infine sull'ultima parete, seminati qua e là in mezzo a vecchi calendari, la foto della figlia suora e diversi santini della Beata Vergine.*<sup>161</sup> (pp. 47-48)

This amusing and colourful description, while representative of Africa's attempt at aesthetically 'christianising' itself, reveals a second, more profound truth closely linked to the cultural arrogance embraced by the colonialists. For all the benefits Christianity brought to Africa (building of schools and hospitals), the missionaries were convinced that the superiority of Europeans was an undeniable fact against the assumed inferiority of the native, and set about systematically destroying their religious symbols. These Eurocentric and iconoclastic attitudes impacted negatively on African colonized countries and in many ways denied them the freedom to develop their own cultures.

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<sup>161</sup> [On the wall directly in front, a picture of the Pope, complete with a blessing, was next to the one of their wedding, the one of the bishop and several portraits of Christ. His favourite one was, without doubt, the one of Christ on the cross with the crown of thorns. Depending on the angle at which one looked at him, he would open his staring eyes to the sky, or he would close them almost winking, with drops of blood dripping from the wounded forehead. On the third wall, a suspended altar covered with a dusty red cloth, held the portrait of the Sacred Heart. Finally, on the last wall, strewn here and there amongst old calendars, the picture of the daughter, a nun, and various saints of the Blessed Virgin.

In the four short stories with which I have dealt Komla-Ebri succeeds in establishing himself as a writer who goes beyond the preconceived ideas of what migrant writers engage with. He has done this not only by calling attention to attitudes and values common to all, but specifically by introducing these same attitudes and values in relation to characters and settings in cultures and customs as diverse and as removed as possible from the 'dominant'<sup>162</sup> culture's perception. His characters are representative of men and woman who strive to overcome and survive situations that continuously test and challenge them. *Abra (Abra:All'incrocio dei sentieri)*, in choosing to leave her mother and home will find love and independence; the returning son in "*Quando attraverserò il fiume*" in convincing the dying woman to forgive, will discover a new found respect mirrored in his father's eyes and in the entire community ; The protagonists Foè (*La ricchezza del povero*) and Ebri (*Il tuono*), in preserving their integrity in the face of humiliation, compromise their survival and their families' survival (Foè, by resigning loses his pension; Ebri, by choosing his son over his people relinquishes his roots and as a result his identity). However, these very choices will cause them to be at the pinnacle of despair, a condition that will ultimately allow them to remain spiritually free.

In this African background within which ordinary people undertake life changing decisions in the face of adversity, Komla-Ebri succeeds in bridging the gap between the two continents. He does this by introducing characters whose actions and choices are governed not by the colour of their skin or by their diversity, but rather by their values and moral ethics. All these short stories are realistic portrayals of human behaviour regardless of the circumstance or setting. There is no colour issue here, and the protagonists could well be you or me. The underlying message is that dignity does not consist with being well housed, well clothed or well fed. Nor does it have anything to do with rank, or one's economic situation or one's vocation. It rests solely on the recognition that individuals are beings of infinite value, and their actions and reactions will depend on their station in life.

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<sup>162</sup> According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* a 'dominant' culture in today's recent history refers to an ex-colonial power or to Europe.

In the collection *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*, the short story 'La Manif' stands apart from the rest of the narrative. While it is comparable to the four short stories discussed in this chapter in that it is set exclusively in Africa, it represents a totally different reality. Like "*Il Tuono*" it has a political motif related to the upsurge of power within a community, but unlike any other short story in *All'Incrocio dei Sentieri*, 'La Manif' deals directly with the aftermath of colonial suppression and the abuse of power associated with it.

The word *La Manif* is derived both in Italian and French from '*la manifestazione/la manifestation*', which in both languages refers to a manifestation or a public gathering of sort. The content of the short story also reminds one of South Africa in the late seventies and eighties when in a show of 'understanding and peaceful negotiation', the government would agree to peaceful manifestations. This same manifestation would then be used as a platform to create chaos, which would ultimately result in the arrest, maiming and even the killing of protestors.

In this story the main character Yao, recounts a single episode which takes place somewhere in Africa where he lives with his family. A peaceful demonstration is organized through which the residents, in taking advantage of a visit by a French delegation, are determined to make them understand that "*anelavamo ardentemente al cambiamento. Eravamo fiduciosi, tranquilli, ma determinati.*" (p.43) [we were fervently longing for change. We were trustful, calm, but determined.]

They are told by the organisers to wear white as a sign of peace and to gather at the park instead of the stadium '*per evitare di farci intrappolare dalle forze dell'esercito in un luogo chiuso*' (p.43) [to avoid us been trapped in a closed space by the army forces]. There is a constant play in the narrative between the *noi* [we] and the *loro* [they], and the importance of the use of these pronouns becomes more apparent when pandemonium ensues and the protagonist realizes that the *loro* were never separate but always amongst them, interwoven with the protestors:

*I nemici si erano infiltrati fra di noi, vestiti di bianco come noi, e potevano essere chiunque,*



*con la differenza che loro erano armati e ci stavano falciando come messe. (p.43)<sup>163</sup>*

The reference to an abuse of power is further established when in reporting the violence and deaths witnessed at first hand, Yao is made to feel insignificant and untrustworthy by the *capo della commisione dell'inchiesta*"(p.46) [chief investigating officer]. His testimony is deemed '*poco attendibile*' [unreliable] due to lack of evidence, and he is casually dismissed with the words "*Avanti un altro!*" [Next!]. (p.46 "*Le Manif*")

While no mention is made of the African country in which the incident occurs, it clearly alludes to a French colony caught in the initial attempts to seek autonomy. Komla-Ebri succeeds in pointing a finger not only at the judicial system which dismally failed its people, but more specifically, he demonstrates through the paternalistic attitude of the investigating officer, that the system in place was representative of the French colonizers who stripped them of their identity by enforcing French language and culture.

This echoes the episode in the novel *Neyla* where the protagonist recalls his schooldays and how the children were punished if they were heard speaking any language other than French and with which I have dealt on page 60. Both episodes embody those Eurocentric attitudes and practices that have in the past deemed Europe a superior power and consequently a superior culture. Such an approach considered anything within the periphery of its eurocentrism inferior and therefore too trivial to be worthy of just treatment.

Whether intentional or not on the part of the author, and by virtue of the name shared by the two protagonists, this short story is analogous to some extent to another short story in the collection with which I have dealt extensively in Chapter 3.2 and it is therefore impossible not to make comparisons.

In "*Vado A Casa*", the protagonist Yao, also finds himself having to confront the police, this time for having attempted to leave France on someone else's air ticket. Although the reasons and the settings for which the protagonists come face to face with the police are

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<sup>163</sup> [ The enemies had infiltrated and were amongst us, dressed in white and they could be anyone, with the difference that they were armed and they were mowing us down like crops]

completely different, (in “*La Manif*” the protagonist is the victim, whereas in “*Vado a Casa*” he is the somewhat ‘ignorant’ perpetrator) the attitudes with which the ‘crimes’ are perceived and consequently handled, are identical.

The same condescending treatment that smacks of colonialism and eurocentrism is meted out to Yao in “*Vado a Casa*” as to the protagonist in “*La Manif*”. This is clearly demonstrated if we compare the two subsequent episodes. In “*La Manif*” the slack and uninterested attitude adopted by the investigating officer has all the signs of paternalism:

*Il capo della commissione d’inchiesta, che portava avanti le indagini sulla ‘presunta strage’ ai giardini, sbadigliò, si grattò la barba poi si passò il dito nel colletto della camicia, guardando annoiato al soffitto il pigro movimento delle pale del ventilatore e chiese in modo indolente con distacco:*

*“Giovanotto, hai visto chi sparava?” (p.46)<sup>164</sup>*

In “*Vado a Casa*”, the immediate use of the informal ‘*tu*’ by the police when Yao is in their presence signals their superior status:

*“Dove hai rubato il biglietto? Ti convien dire la verità altrimenti ti mettiamo in gabbia!”<sup>165</sup>* (p.28) [Where did you steal the ticket? You had better tell the truth or we will put you in the cage!].

In both stories the reader is left with the impression that what is in question here is not so much the crime committed, as the person’s credibility based primarily on the colour of his/her skin. What is startlingly clear in both accounts is that there is a hierarchy at play, a hierarchy that determines and judges a people’s worth by virtue of their colour and culture, and based on those very characteristics, they are deemed inferior or ‘worthy’ by the ‘ruling’ class.

Of interest in “*La Manif*” is Komla-Ebri’s attention to detail which further validates my previous statements regarding his mastery of the Italian language. (cf. ch.4, pp.73-74)

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<sup>164</sup> [ The chief investigating officer, who was carrying out the inquiry on the ‘presumed tragedy’ at the gardens , yawned, scratched his beard and then passed his finger along the inside of his shirt collar, and whilst watching the lazy movement of blades of the ventilator asked with detachment and in an indolent manner ; ‘Young man, did you see who was shooting?’ ]

<sup>165</sup> ‘*gabbia*’ is the slang terminology for prison

This is especially evident in his description of the young girl who catches Yao's eye at the gathering:

*Era alta, con gli zigomi lievemente sporgenti e i capelli tirati indietro sulla nuca, una pelle d'ebano che brillava sotto i raggi del sole. Portava una gonna kaki come le scolarette, con una camicina bianca di dentelle, stretta, dalla quale sporgevano invitanti e provocanti i suoi capezzoli. (p.42)<sup>166</sup>*

The same attention is observed when she falls to the ground, one of the many victims of this senseless tragedy:

*Vidi incredulo, come in un film al rallentatore , la ragazza dagli occhi dolci accasciarsi a terra, con un gemito, e notai una macchia rossa nascere ed allargarsi sul suo fianco.(p.43)<sup>167</sup>*

Also noteworthy is the author's ability to depict with accuracy peoples' general reaction when faced with terror and panic. Confronted with an uncontrollable situation, Yao does not take on the role of the hero but runs as fast as he can away from the scene. The passage that follows is an excellent example of how, when threatened with danger, people totally immobilize their thinking process resulting in the disruption of normal behaviour.

*Mi misi a correre. Vidi un bambino piangere, gridare di terrore, con le braccia allargate accanto al corpo esanime di una donna. Invaso dal panico lo sopassai senza fermarmi. (pp.43-44)<sup>168</sup>*

In the stories discussed in this chapter Komla-Ebri not only explores the relationship between integrity and injustice (*Il Tuono, La Ricchezza del Povero*), but also touches on motiveless malevolence (*La Manif*). All this takes place within the confines of a setting unfamiliar to the Italian reader. Some of the characters like Abra are wonderfully drawn and win our empathy almost immediately. Others like Nukuku (*Quando attraverserò il*

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<sup>166</sup> [She was tall with slightly high cheekbones, and her hair was pulled back at the nape, her skin was like ebony and shone under the rays of the sun. She wore a kaki skirt like schoolgirls, and a tight fitting white lacy shirt from which her nipples protruded provocatively and inviting.]

<sup>167</sup> [ I watched incredulous, like in a slow motion film as the girl with the beautiful eyes fell moaning to the ground, and noticed a red stain grow and spread on her hip]

<sup>168</sup> [I began to run. I saw a small boy crying, screaming in terror, his arms outstretched next to the lifeless body of a woman. Invaded by panic, I ran past him without stopping]

*fiume*) are conspicuous by their absence. Still others, like Yao (*Vado a Casa*), win our compassion not by their strengths but by their very weaknesses. All however, implicitly challenge us to think about our own idea of what it means to be human. More importantly, as a writer who does not want to be labelled a migrant or an afro-Italian writer, Komla-Ebri succeeds through this collection of short stories in making the reader think outside a conventional framework, and perceive his characters, notwithstanding their colour and the setting, as men and women who experience and live life-changing, profound emotions.

## CONCLUSION

My aim in this dissertation has been to explore in depth the narrative of Komla-Ebri and to uncover his originality as a writer. In my quest, I have traced the journeys of the first migrant writers and have become aware of their humiliation and alienation by a people filled with prejudices and xenophobic attitudes. This in turn has led me to discover uncomfortable truths about a country I love and of which I hold citizenship. The intolerance towards diverse cultures and the “*grande problema dell’accoglimento dell’altro*” [the serious problem regarding the acceptance of the other] was highlighted recently by the president of Italy, Giorgio Napolitano, at the annual ceremony held in Rome for *Nuovi Cittadini Italiani* [new Italian citizens]. He observed that Italians need to adopt a more open-minded and benevolent approach to migrants and stated that in order to do this “*devon cader i vecchi pregiudizi*”<sup>169</sup> [old prejudices must fall away].

In light of this statement the narrative of Komla-Ebri is an instrument of knowledge as he has a real and deep understanding of the world he narrates. His experience and his journey as a migrant have not only taken him into the environments he describes, but the information he gives us is first hand. Indeed, the themes and motifs that he develops in his narrative are not new. The concepts of otherness, unbelonging and loss of identity have dominated postcolonial literature for decades. Similarly, the themes of the journey and the return have resonated across literary frontiers since the beginning of time. Where then does his originality lie?

I believe that Komla-Ebri’s uniqueness stems from a freshness and a spontaneity that he brings to the Italian language. This is not only apparent in his use of *oraliture* which he transfers effortlessly to a language unaccustomed to this style of writing, and with which I have dealt on Chapter 4.1, but also in his mastery of the Italian language. Komla-Ebri has succeeded in weaving linguistic elements and characteristics of African *oraliture* with lyrical passages worthy of being considered alongside the best of Italian prose. Furthermore, his narrative reveals an author who has the skill to describe with insight the obstacles his characters face when shifting backward and forward between diverse cultures. Aware that the concept of otherness is not restricted solely to skin

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<sup>169</sup> Rai Telegiornale (Rai International) 13/11/2008.

colour, but that as Moni Ovadia<sup>170</sup> observed in an interview with *Focus.it*, it is a disorder that has hounded mankind since biblical times,<sup>171</sup> Komla-Ebri has mastered the art in his narrative not only to be the other, but also to be the one who through fear and ignorance condemns and judges the other. This he has done on both sides of the cultural barrier with equal compassion and humanity. The stories “*Vado a casa*” and “*Yevi-il-ragno*” from *All’Incrocio dei Sentieri*, (pp.24-38), are excellent examples of this.

Notwithstanding the fact that Komla-Ebri illustrates in his narrative, the inability of some of his characters to experience the life of the other as real or to understand the decisive difference between other ways of life, his mission as a writer is not to denounce and to berate. Rather, in expounding otherness and alienation beyond the colour of the skin, he succeeds in exposing similarities between diverse cultures, rather than highlighting the differences. This is especially the case with the characters in his African stories, (Chapter.4.2 pp.77-84) who, though ignorant of and removed from western attitudes, exhibit values and ethics akin to all mankind. It is here, in my view, that Komla-Ebri rises above the constraints of migrant literature and truly becomes a voice in Italian contemporary literature.

In conclusion, Komla-Ebri’s narrative strives above all to be a message of hope in a world divided and governed by prejudice and ignorance of the other. The author’s calling, by his own admission, is to act as a bridge between two diverse continents and a mediator between two diverse cultures. Indeed, the novel *Neyla* is a fitting tribute to this. However, it is those characters who in their journeys, fall in love and choose out of love to make a life with the other, who are not only recipients and carriers of Komla-Ebri’s philosophy but are proof that cultural barriers can be broken down (cf. “*Due scatole di fiammiferi*” in ch.3.1 and “*Yevi-il-ragno*” in ch.2.1). It is only with mutual respect and tolerance and in listening to the other that the gap that separates the ‘*noi*’ [we] from the ‘*altro*’ [other] is narrowed. This can only occur if the individual uniqueness of every

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<sup>170</sup>Moni Ovadia is a highly respected intellectual and a Jewish musician who has lived in Milan since the late 1940’s.

<sup>171</sup> In an interview with *Focus.it* 10/08/2008, (RAI TV) Ovadia stated that “*Caino è il primogenito che fatica ad accogliere il secondogenito. Abele è l’altro, è quello che è venuto dopo, è quello che pone il problema della relazione. [...] Abele è l’intruso*”. [Cain is the firstborn who struggles to accept the secondborn. Abel is the other, the one who came after, he is the one who creates a problem in the relationship [...] he is the intruder.] “

culture is revered and relished. The research has shown that assimilation and integration are not the answer to harmonious living. The world, as Komla-Ebri observes - *“non è un frullato dove tutto si mescola, bensì una macedonia dove il gusto di ogni singolo frutto contribuisce ad esaltare il sapore finale”*<sup>172</sup> [is not a smoothie where everything is mixed, but a fruit salad where every single fruit contributes to exhalt the final taste].

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<sup>172</sup> Marina Gersony. *Il Giornale: “Il Razzismo spiegato con le barzellette. Intervista”* 8 May 2006. [www.Kossi-komlaebri.net/intervista.giornale](http://www.Kossi-komlaebri.net/intervista.giornale) accessed 13/11/2008

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## CORRESPONDENCE

From: Federica Bellusci Thursday - November 15, 2007 9:59 AM  
To: Komla-Ebri, Kossi A.  
Subject: dall"Africa

Caro Kossi

E' un sacco che non ci sentiamo, ma spero che questa mia ti trovi bene, come noi qui. Oramai qui e' arrivato l'estate, quel caldo quasi insopportabile che tu consoci bene! Fra poco ci sono le vacanze ma abbiamo deciso di rimanere a casa, passare lunghe ore in spiaggia e rilassarci!

Il mio Master sta andando un po' con il rallentatore anche perche' ho avuto tante ore di insegnamento quest'anno e ho dovuto concentrarmi su altri studi e ricerche, ma ora che sono piu' libera vorrei farti alcune domande che magari avrai gia' sentito e risposto mille volte. Pazienza! Come si dice in inglese humour me!"

1. Scrivi racconti nella tua madre lingua (per madre lingua intendo la lingua dei tuoi antenati, non si chiama togolese vero?) e se la risposta e' positiva che cosa scrivi?
2. Lo so che scrivi anche in francese, ma cosa? ricordo che mi avevi parlato di un documento medico in francese o qualcosa simile, quindi anche qui che genere?
3. Se usi specificamente l'italiano per i tuoi racconti letterari, perche' hai scelto l'italiano e non il francese che in fondo e' una lingua con la quale ti trovi piu' a tuo agio.
4. Che cosa rappresentano queste tre lingue per te?

per il momento e' tutto. Ti ringrazio in anticipo.

ps. Hai gia' prenotato il tuo viaggio in sud africa per il 2010?

Un abbraccio

Federica

Mrs Federica Bellusci  
Academic Co-ordinator  
School of Language, Literature and Linguistics  
Italian Studies  
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tel 2601091  
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From: "kossi komla-ebri"  
<kossik@tin.it>

Wednesday - November 28, 2007 1:19 AM

To: "Federica Bellusci" <Belluscif@ukzn.ac.za>  
Subject: Re: dall"Africa"

Attachments: Mime.822 (16052 bytes) [\[View\]](#) [\[Save As\]](#)

Cara Federica, eccomi!

Sì stiamo tutti bene a parte acciacchi -primi segnali del trascorsi degli anni!.

Rispondo velocemente alle tue domande:

1. Scrivi racconti nella tua madre lingua ( per madre lingua intendo la lingua dei tuoi antenati, non si chiama togolese vero?) e se la risposta e' positiva che cosa scrivi? La mia lingua madre si chiama Ewe (che abbiamo in comune con popolazioni del Ghana). Purtroppo ai miei tempi non veniva insegnata nelle scuole quindi ne ho solo una conoscenza orale. La forma scritta ho cercato da solo di impararla così riesco con fatica a decifrarla" ma non sono in grado di scriverlo e tanto meno in forma letteraria.
2. Lo so che scrivi anche in francese, ma cosa? ricordo che mi avevi parlato di un documento medico in francese o qualcosa simile, quindi anche qui che genere? In francese ho scritto, con il collega Aldo Locurto, la versione francese di "Afrique-La Santé en images" un manuale di salute per l'educazione sanitaria delle popolazioni che è stato poi tradotto in inglese e viene distribuito gratuitamente su tutto il continente.

Di letteratura ho al mio attivo solo un racconto "Le huitième péché" (l'ottavo peccato: Del Rap Hip hop) per l'omonimo antologia delle Editions Ndzé 2006 (Francia). Questa antologia è nata da un "Call for paper" per scrittori africani a cura di Kangni Alem sul tema dei 7 vizi capitali. E ovviamente ho scelto...l'ottavo!

Ultimamente ho ricevuto da parte di Bessora (la scrittrice franco-svizzera-camerunese che era a Durban con la sua bambina) un call per un racconto sul tema "Nelson Mandela". Ho accettato ma sinceramente non so ancora su che cosa , su quale aspetto o avvenimento della sua vita scrivere: si accettano forti suggerimenti e consigli!

3. Se usi specificamente l'italiano per i tuoi racconti letterari, perché hai scelto l'italiano e non il francese che in fondo e' una lingua con la quale ti trovi più a tuo agio. Ho scelto ormai più specificamente l'italiano rispetto al francese per tre motivi essenziali:
  - a) ho iniziato a scrivere in italiano" spinto da un forte bisogno di comunicare", di urlare, rivendicare innanzitutto la mia esistenza e la mia essenza in questa società per dire ci sono" che non sono solo una mano d'opera" che ho pensieri, sogni, sentimenti. Di fronte alla totale ignoranza" (nel senso etimologico) nel confronto della mia cultura, scrivere in italiano significa aprire una finestra sugli usi e costumi della mia terra. Quindi volendo comunicare con gli italiani la strada più breve non poteva essere che nella loro lingua. Una scelta di lingua come percorso" alla conoscenza.
  - b) ho scelto e continuo a scrivere in italiano" perché ormai per me è la lingua del quotidiano, di una integrazione desiderata e scelta, è la lingua del mio vivere e sognare: è la lingua dell'amore.
  - c) 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 d'immaginario e non rancori nei suoi confronti come potrei averlo anche inconsciamente con quella francese" che è e rimane la lingua dei colonizzatori che ci volevano civilizzare fino al midollo spinale!
4. Che cosa rappresentano queste tre lingue per te?

Oggi, mi ritengo un uomo d'identità plurima e mosaica crocevia di culture lingue e linguaggi.

La mia lingua materna (l'Ewe) rimane quella della nostalgia, dei ricordi, delle credenze, dei suoni, sapori e profumi: la lingua del cordone ombelicale.

La lingua francese rappresenta quella degli studi, della mente: la lingua della ragione, quella imposta.

L'italiano è prima di tutto la lingua del quotidiano, del comunicare, della scrittura ma anche quella dell'amore e della passione perché è una lingua scelta.

2010 in Sud Africa? per ora non credo: ma non si può mai sapere!

Ciao e cari saluti a Patrick!

Kossi

From: Federica Bellusci Friday - December 7, 2007 10:30 AM

To: Komla-Ebri, Kossi A.

Subject: Eccomi dinnuovo

Caro Kossi

Sto cercando sui vari siti ma non esiste molta informazione su Kossi io capisco il tuo bisogno di privacy, pero' qualche domanda te la devo fare.

1) Mi potresti dire qualcosa della tua famiglia in Togo, In quanti siete..ecc. vedi tu, un piccolo quadro storico di Kossi prima che va in Europa.

2) Quando e' che sei andato in Francia per finire la maturita', e come mai hai deciso di poi andare in Italia per studiare medicina? Perche' l'Italia e non un altro paese?

3) C'e' uno scrittore che ti ha particolarmente influenzato?

Per il momento e' tutto

Ti ringrazio

Federica

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From: "Kossi A. Komla-Ebri" <kossik@tin.it> Friday - December 14, 2007 3:49 AM

To: "Federica Bellusci" <Belluscif@ukzn.ac.za>

Cara Federica, mi stai chiedendo quasi ti raccontare tutta la mia vita!

Come non ho molto tempo in questi giorni, sarò, per tua fortuna telegrafico.

1) Mi potresti dire qualcosa della tua famiglia in Togo, In quanti siete..ecc. vedi tu, un piccolo quadro storico &nbsp;di Kossi prima che va in Europa.

Sono il secondo figlio e primo maschio di una famiglia monogamica di 12 figli (6 maschi-sei femmine).I miei genitori ora in pensione erano insegnanti alla missione cattolica (mal pagati e talvolta non pagati: lavoravano per la gloria di Dio).Cattolici praticanti convinti (la fede dei carbonari: quella che solleva le montagne) una coppia molto unita (MAI visti litigare) che di fronte a qualunque difficoltà si affidano alla preghiera che in casa si faceva tutti insieme davanti all'altare del cuor sacro di Gesù ogni giorno alla mattina e alla sera e prima di ogni pasto. I miei tenevano alla nostra formazione:oggi ho un fratello agronomo, una sorella assistente sociale, due infermieri professionali, una ostetrica, un prete, due religiose, una nell'informatica e un tecnico in telecomunicazioni e uno ancora indeciso. Ci siamo dispersi per il mondo: tre sorelle e un fratello sono in Francia, un fratello si trova a Omaha in Nebraska, un fratello è in Benin, due fratelli e due sorelle sono ora in Togo dopo soggiorni in Francia, Burkina, Italia e Costa d' Avorio. La mia sorella ostetrica è qui in Italia a Merone non lontano da noi e lavora anche lei nell'ospedale di Erba.

I miei vivono a Lomé nel quartiere ribelle di Bè dal 1967.

Prima vivevamo a Tsévié (35 km da Lomé) dove sono nato e vissuto fino nel 1965 un posto dove l'acqua scarseggiava davvero.Lo stipendio scarso e mia mamma faceva mille commerci per arrotondare (sarta, venditrice di legna, petrolio, ghiaccio, acqua ghiacciata, dolcetti, pane ecc...) poi si affidava tutto alla vergine!(di cui mio padre ex scout e marianista convinto di cui è stato segretario generale per l'Africa dell'ovest)

2) Quando e' che sei andato in Francia per finire la maturità', e come mai hai deciso di poi andare in Italia per studiare medicina? Perché l'Italia e non un altro paese?

Sono andato via da casa giovanissimo nel 1965 per la Francia (in un College di frati - san Giovanni Battista della Salle-a Nantes) grazie ad una borsa di studio offerta ai figli meritevoli (allora sembravo un genio!) degli insegnanti della missione cattolica. "Gli anni di solitudine al cospetto della nostalgia". Ho compiuto quindi gli studi secondari a Nantes e fatto la maturità al collège Saint Esprit à Beauvais.

Dopo la maturità sono sceso a Parigi dove ho vissuto nel quartiere Barbès, con l'illusione di lavorare e iscrivermi all'università. In Togo allora non c'era la facoltà di medicina. A Parigi ho conosciuto la fame e mille lavori duri (da bestia!). La fortuna o meglio il destino mi ha fatto incontrare casualmente nel metrò a Parigi l'arcivescovo del Togo ( zio all'africana" dal lato di mia madre) che di fronte alla mia situazione mi ha promesso una borsa di studio e raccomandato per il collegio internazionale Villa San Giacomo" in Bologna dal Cardinale Giacomo Lercaro. Anche se non conoscevo l'italiano, non ho voluto perdere per nessuna ragione questa nuova via proposta dal mio destino.

3) C'e' uno scrittore che ti ha particolarmente influenzato?

Direi molti: leggevo tantissimo e di tutto (il tempo non mancava in College! ) I miei classici erano francesi: Corneille, Racine, Molière, Hugo, Beaudelaire, Lamartine ma soprattutto Zola e Guy de Maupassant ( credo che da lui ho preso la passione per i racconti). Non sono un patito della poesia. In Italia ho iniziato a leggere da Calvino

passando per Moravia a Benni ad Erri De Luca ma leggo molti autori africani contemporanei.

Un abbraccio, Kossi

Caro Kossi

martedì , 08 aprile 2008.

Spero che stiate tutti bene e che non sei troppo preso a fare pubblicità negativa per Berlusconi!

E già, oramai lo sai che quando ti scrivo e perché ho bisogno di qualcosa.

Aiutami a chiarire i miei pensieri? Come tu sai io sono nata qui in Sud Africa e sono legatissima ad un paese che a dire la verità conosco poco.

Io e te siamo simili in quanto siamo tutti e due nati in Africa con un forte legame con l'Italia, tu più dei me perché ci vivi e ci lavori. Siamo tutti e due con un piede di qua e uno di là! E ahimè qui sub-entra il problema dell'identità , una patata bollente in Sud Africa in questo periodo, dove tutti vogliono dire la loro.

Nadine Gordimer per esempio, ha dichiarato in un'intervista (e non è la sola a pensarla così) che per essere considerati veramente 'africani' in Sud Africa bisogna aver partecipato in un modo o l'altro alla lotta. L'essere 'africano' non è un diritto di nascita ma un merito. ( Anche se non lo ha detto e sottinteso che si riferisce ai bianchi)

L'accademico Molefi Asante invece ha suggerito che secondo i tedeschi essere 'africano' ed essere 'tedesco' non significa essere 'tedesco' proprio perché è una questione di profilo. Il che mi fa pensare se la stessa cosa vale per l'Italia. E voglio usarli come esempio. Se io la mia famiglia venissimo in Italia dubito che avremmo problemi nell'essere considerati 'italiani' dagli italiani perché semplicemente aderiamo ai requisiti necessari del profilo italiano. La domanda che ti faccio è la seguente : per essere considerati italiani dagli italiani è sufficiente esserci nati, come per esempio i tuoi figli, o è l'italianità di una persona ancora definita dal colore della pelle?

Ti ringrazio, un abbraccio

Federica

From: "Kossi A. Komla-Ebri" <kossik@tin.it> Tuesday - April 15, 2008 1:02 AM  
To: "Federica Bellusci" <Belluscif@ukzn.ac.za>  
Subject: Re: lettera da Federica

Attachments: Mime.822 (10975 bytes) [\[View\]](#) [\[Save As\]](#)

Cara Federica,



come saprai da stasera siamo ritornati all'inferno con il nano" ridens e una lega-Bossi" forte. Dico solo : ognuno ha il governo che si merita. Non vi è più senso del bene comune ne progettazione sul futuro: tutti vogliono tutto e subito, egoisticamente e soprattutto senza fare sacrifici. Un disastro!!!Tempi duri ci aspettano!

Per venire al tuo quesito: ho sentito di recente Nadine Gordimer ad un'intervista su Rai3 ripetere il concetto che hai detto riferito chiaramente ai bianchi sudafricani".

La tua domanda: per essere considerati italiani dagli italiani è sufficiente esserci nati, come per esempio i tuoi figli, o l'italianità di una persona è ancora definita dal colore della pelle?

Nell'Italia di oggi e a maggior ragione in quella che sta all'orizzonte prossimo non è sufficiente essere nati" per rivendicare la propria italianità. Il colore della pelle è dirimente per la maggioranza.

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 a Vasco Rossi. Ho letto da Dante, Calvino, Moravia a Erri De Luca. Parlo e scrivo discretamente la lingua italiana e ne mastico alcuni dialetti. Mia moglie è italiana, i miei figli sono italiani, ho avuto la cittadinanza italiana, ho mangiato tanti di quei spaghetti, tortellini e tagliatelle da essere italiano ad honorem senza disdegnare la polenta con la cazzeula e tanto meno le orecchiette con le cime di rape. Ho bevuto dal Barbera al Montepulciano passando dal Barbaresco al Pino grigio, onorando il Chianti. Mi sono sorbito come tutti le crisi di governo che si sono susseguite in questi anni, gli scioperi, le code, i ritardi dei treni, i Festival di Sanremo e ho tiffato appassionatamente per gli azzurri" a tutti i mondiali. E dopo 34 anni, 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, &nbsp;spha 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 quel che non siamo.

Decisamente stasera sono un pò amaro!

Un forte abbraccio.

Kossi