

Women's Writing Between the Border and the Non-Place: The Emerging Female Discourses in Italian Migrant Literature / *A escrita feminina entre a fronteira e o não lugar: discursos femininos em ascensão na Literatura Italiana de Migração*

Laura Gherlone*

ABSTRACT

In the midst of the Soviet *Perestroika* process, Yuri Lotman wrote his reflections on the concept of boundary. Having witnessed massive migrations, forced expulsions and unprecedented ethno-geographical reconfigurations, he knew how much a border can be loaded with a cultural meaning that transcends its spatial dimensions. To be aware of this was all the more urgent at a historic time of transition, rebuilding and opening, when linguistic-cultural policies could be a means of promoting integration and accepting the “foreigner.” This contribution takes this historical and conceptual framework as its starting point and aims to analyze a cultural phenomenon of great current interest in contemporary Italian literature: the increasingly “intrusive” presence of women writers from the former colonies who choose to produce their works in a “foreign” language (Italian), using writing as a field of experimentation, cultural hybridization, and generation of a public discursive space, bearer of the female migrant gaze.

KEYWORDS: Yuri Lotman; Boundary; Migrant Italian Literature; Women's Writing; Foreigner

RESUMO

Durante o processo da Perestroika soviética, Iuri Lotman escreveu reflexões sobre o conceito de fronteira. Como testemunhou migrações em massa, expulsões forçadas e reconfigurações etnogeográficas sem precedentes, sabia o quanto uma fronteira pode ser carregada de significado cultural que transcende sua dimensão espacial. Ter esse tipo de consciência era ainda mais urgente tendo em vista ser esse um período histórico de transição, reconstrução e abertura, quando as políticas linguístico-culturais poderiam ser um meio de promover integração e aceitação do “estrangeiro”. Esta contribuição parte desse quadro histórico-conceitual e busca analisar um fenômeno cultural de grande interesse na literatura italiana contemporânea: a presença “intrusa” crescente de escritoras das antigas colônias que escolheram escrever suas obras em uma língua estrangeira, o italiano, usando a escrita como um campo de experimentação, hibridismo cultural e criação de um espaço discursivo público que traz o olhar da mulher migrante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Iuri Lotman; Fronteira; Literatura italiana de migração; Escrita feminina; Estrangeiro

* Universidad Nacional de Córdoba - UNC, Facultad de Lenguas, Centro de Investigaciones de la Facultad de Lenguas, Córdoba, Córdoba (Province), Argentina; CONICET; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0117-1077>; laura.gherlone@gmail.com

Introduction

To introduce the topic of emerging female discourses in two specific cases of Italian post-colonial literature, specifically the works of Albanian Elvira Dones (*Durrës, 1960) and Italian-Somali Igiaba Scego (*Rome, 1974), I would like to begin with some reflections offered by Yuri Lotman, the Russian scholar known for his contributions to literary theory, semiotic science and cultural studies.

I will start with a concept that Lotman developed in a 1982 essay, in collaboration with his colleague Boris Uspensky, about *izgoinichestvo* (LOTMAN; USPENSKY, 2002 [1982]): a difficult concept to translate but could be expressed as “marginalization” or “downgrading.” This is an existential condition which, in the old Russia, was attributed to people (*izgoi*) who fell upon misfortune and were considered unworthy of being part of the community (ruined merchants, the mentally ill, beggars),¹ but also included individuals who chose to break with “legitimate” society (such as bandits, outlaws, vagabonds, insubordinates, and rebels). Lotman clearly explains this last acceptance of the term *izgoi* in 1989 when talking about the relation between culture and intellectuality (*intelligentnost’*), namely the capacity to distinguish what *indifferent eyes* are unable to perceive:

[To] allow such a phenomenon as intellectuality to arise, people needed a certain degree of independence, and at different historical moments society was provided with such self-determining groups. Often these were people who had been thrown out of the social order or had cut ties with it themselves, namely restless individuals who were not able to get comfortable in a given social environment. They cannot yet be called intellectuals, but this is the soil, the environment from which they will grow. [...] For example, in medieval Rus’, a particular group called *izgoi* came to light. They were somehow not welcomed by society and everywhere they felt alien, ill-at-ease and

¹ The so-called *izgoi*—as the historian and specialist in Ukrainian Studies Paul R. Magocsi underlines—was “a heterogeneous body of people, including princes without territory, sons of priests who could neither read or write, merchants who had gone bankrupt, and slaves who had bought their freedom. In short, the *izgoi* were people whose social status had changed and who therefore did not fit into the existing social order” (MAGOCSI, 2010, p.94).

full of criticism (LOTMAN, 2005 [1989], pp.486-487, emphasis mine).²

These different and rather free people—outlaws (*vol'nitsa*) and wandering people—were the soil where a “new humanity” with a broader mind and a more acute conscience started to emerge: in Lotman’s vision, marginality (by choice or force of circumstance), freedom and intellectuality are considered a complete whole.

Returning to Lotman and Uspensky’s essay, although they focus mainly on the figure of the *izgoi* until the 16th-17th century,³ this term is still used to define all those social situations in which the individual is on the margins of the human community, in a condition of incommunicability and isolation. It is no coincidence that the famous film starring Tom Hanks, *Cast Away*, has been translated into Russian with the word *izgoi*.

Where do Foreigners Come From?

People who are thrown out of the social structure or who, for any other reason, are *outside* of it are perceived as a social anomaly, and at the same time represent a social necessity (LOTMAN; USPENSKY, 2002 [1982], p.231; original emphasis).⁴

The *izgoinichestvo* condition, according to the two exponents of the so-called Semiotic School of Tartu-Moscow,⁵ is strongly spatial in nature because outcasts are those who live far from the borders of order and organization or, in other words, far from the culture.

The borders, or limits (*granitsy*)—another fundamental concept of Lotmanian theory—, are all those geographical-territorial, linguistic and ideological elements that

² Original text in Russian: “[...] чтобы такое явление, как интеллигентность, возникло, нужны люди определенной степени независимости, и общество в разные исторические моменты выделяет такие относительно независимые группы. Часто это бывают люди, выброшенные из общества или же сами порвавшие с ним связи. Всегда будут люди, которые не устроились уютно в данной социальной среде. Их еще нельзя назвать людьми интеллигентной души, но это уже почва, среда, из которой они вырастают. [...] Так, например, в средние века возникают определенные группы — на Руси их называют изгоями. Они как-то не пригрелись в обществе, они в каждой среде — чужие, им неуютно, они — критики.”

³ We refer to the period that precedes the Westernization of Russia promoted by Peter I (1672-1725).

⁴ Original text in Russian: “Люди, выброшенные за пределы социальной структуры или по какой-либо иной причине находящиеся *вне* ее, воспринимаемая как социальная аномалия, являются одновременно социальной необходимостью.”

⁵ See Velmezova (2015).

mark the, so to speak, legitimate space from the abusive one or, simply, the one without any identity.⁶ The *izgoi*, as the two authors write, is that person who

lives *outside*: outside the house, staggering along the streets and spending the night under fences or in taverns (in modern times, these are the stations, which are *unlivable* places), wandering along the roads, living in forests or cemeteries or settling on the outskirts of an urban boundary. It is significant that when many people of this type come together, from their internal point of view they form a type of community (*soobschestvo*), but from the viewpoint of a given society's classification system, they do not form any community but remain an amorphous mass of individual, "rogue" people (LOTMAN; USPENSKY, 2002 [1982], p.227; original emphasis).⁷

We can see situations where this condition existed but do not necessarily refer to ancient Rus' as, for example, the lepers in medieval Europe, who were destined to live in the *non-place* of the leprosarium, isolated and cursed. It also recalls the phenomenon of the witch-hunts in medieval and early modern Europe when women were publicly burnt at the stake for being poor and alone (widows or unmarried). They lived on the margins of village society and were considered *strange* and, to a certain extent, *rebels*.⁸

Nowadays, the so-called *sotsial'nyi izgoi*, in its most extreme and dramatic form, is a kind of social leper, a person who lives in an intermediate, "suspended" position, on the fringes of any social group, or one who establishes relatively few interpersonal relationships with others.

I would like to emphasize the fact that the subtitle of the 1982 essay is The 'Own' and the 'Alien' in the History of Russian Culture. In other words, the condition of marginalization, with all its possible negative associations (being expelled, rejected,

⁶ For an in-depth exploration of the concept of *border* as treated by Lotman, see Vólkova Américo (2017).

⁷ Original text in Russian: "[...] проживает *вне* — вне дома, шатаясь по улицам и ночуя под заборами (или в кабаках, в новое время на вокзалах, которые *не* жилье), странствуя по дорогам, живя в лесу или на кладбище или селясь за городской чертой. Существенно, что в случае, когда людей этого типа скопляется много и со своей внутренней позиции они образуют некое сообщество, с точки зрения основной для данного общества классификации они никакого сообщества не образуют, оставаясь аморфной массой отдельных 'изгоев.'"

⁸ As pointed out by the historian Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, women accused of *maleficia* fit a precise stereotype: "They were female, over fifty, often widowed or single, poor, and in some way peculiar—they looked or behaved oddly or were known for cursing, scolding or aberrant sexual behavior. They were often on the margins of village society, and dependent on the good will of others for their support, and suspect because they were not under the direct control of a man" (WIESNER-HANKS, 2000, p.277).

exiled, excluded, stigmatized, reneged, banished from the social environment of belonging, or treated like a fugitive) has to do with the creation of a cultural, conventional space considered one's own (*svoe*): legal, rightful, preferable and necessarily extendable to the space of others. If we were to approach Lotman's work from beginning to end and vice versa, we could probably affirm that the problem of conflict generated by the presence of the *other*⁹—which is often summed up in a spatial image—is the guiding thread of his culturological reflection. It is an opposition that is played out on the border, as a place of dialogue or, on the contrary, of exacerbation for those who are different (*chuzhoe*). As the Georgian slavist Nina Kauchtschischwili, a famous authority on Lotman, wrote, “Dialogism is crystallized [...] by Lotman in the opposition between *svoe* and *chuzhoe*, an opposition that should be placed on the cover of his omnia work because it summarizes the substance of his thought” (KAUCHTSCHISCHWILI, 1996, p.73).¹⁰

Having witnessed the massive migrations, forced evictions and unprecedented ethno-geographical reconfigurations created *ad hoc* by the Stalinist regime, Lotman was aware of how much a border can carry a cultural meaning that transcends its spatial dimensions. In fact, we must interpret the 1982 essay and other writings that follow it as a courageous attempt to denounce, through the figure of *izgoi*, the linguistic-cultural policies of the Soviet Union, which, as it is known, was essentially a Russia-centric state, even though a multiethnic federation was proclaimed. From his youth, Lotman had personally experienced the condition of *izgoinichestvo* after being exiled to the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic for his Jewish roots. It is no coincidence that in the context of an “outlying” country, he elaborates its cultural semiotics through the cardinal categories of “centre” and “periphery,” which, it must be said, are not exclusively the fruit of his theoretical genius, but were already part of the geopolitical and ethnic imagery of Stalinist times. From the heart of Moscow, the Kremlin radiated its Russianness over all of its non-Russian peripheral territories, turning the union into an empire through a campaign of exaltation of Mother Russia and the repression of minorities.

⁹ For an in-depth exploration of the concept of *otherness* as treated by Lotman, see Gherlone (2016).

¹⁰ Original text in Italian: “La dialogicità si cristallizza [...] in Lotman nell’opposizione tra *svoe* e *čuzoe*, opposizione che si dovrebbe porre a frontespizio della sua *opera omnia* perché riassume la sostanza del suo pensiero.”

Initially the Soviet Union was characterized by a policy of exalting individual nationalities because Bolshevism desperately sought “to consolidate its rule over the periphery” and, in order to do this, it had to implement a policy of resizing the centre, i.e. Russian nationalism. This “involved a sustained effort to eradicate the Russian past, its cultural expressions, its rural roots and the institutions that embodied Russianness, especially the Orthodox Church and the Romanov dynasty” (ZIA-EBRAHIMI, 2007).

However, the “putting down of roots”—the so-called policy of *korenizatsiya*¹¹ (indigenization or nativization)—had a short life. With Stalin in power, the Soviet Union became what Eric Hobsbawm defined as a centralized “non-hereditary monarchy” (HOBSBAWM, 1995, p.389) ruled by terror, personality worship and the use of a pseudo-religious symbolism, at least until 1956.¹² In the two decades following the 20th Communist Party Congress, the “centre” began to exhibit a certain tolerance towards non-Russian (peripheral) territories and populations, but always through an asymmetrical power relationship.¹³

In the 1980s, and especially after 1985, Lotman’s language became less opaque, less metaphorical, so to speak, in terms of social criticism. It is not surprising, for example, that in his 1984 essay, *Dynamics of Cultural Systems* (unpublished in Russian and here translated from Italian), he develops the *izgoi* concept through the figure of the *barbarian*, the *one who babbles* (according to Greek etymology), in other words, the one who is incapable of being understood, and therefore, a foreigner—a condition from which infinite derogatory adjectives can be inferred: rude, savage, primitive, uncivilized, cruel, ferocious, inhuman, bloodthirsty.

Lotman thus proposes some examples that serve to understand his transversal (and ironic) gaze:

The ancient Greeks regarded as barbarians the Persians and Egyptians, who surpassed them by the richness of their cultural traditions; the

¹¹ See Saunders & Strukov (2010).

¹² For an in-depth exploration of the organization of the Stalinist regime, see Lewin (2016).

¹³ See Simon (1991).

Romans considered the Carthaginians and Greeks barbarians.¹⁴ The Indo-Aryans, who had conquered the Indian subcontinent, described the original populations of the Indus valley through the Sanskrit word *mleccha*—which has some shades of the Greek βάρβαρος— thus creating an absolutely false situation. In other words, since they themselves were barbarians, they accused the heirs of previous civilizations of barbarism. This list of “despicable strangers” would later include the Arabs, Turks, and the Chinese.

In the same way, the Arabs [...] used the word *adjami*, which had the same meaning as “barbarian,” to define the Persians, heirs of the ancient and high culture against which they had fought for influence on the Muslim world (LOTMAN, 1985 [1984], p.141).¹⁵

Barbarians are such, according to the adopted perspective, as it happens with minorities (the non-culture), that sometimes they are even numerically superior to the majority but, in the self-perception of the latter, they are considered a limited group. It is the case of the women in medieval and early modern European culture: a minority considered “a perfidious ‘Satanic army’ punishable by annihilation” (LOTMAN, 1985 [1984], p.142).¹⁶

Since culture is a closed concept, it necessarily presupposes a non-culture as its antipodes, which lies outside its border. [...] Each culture creates its own type of “barbarian.” [The “being outside” of the stranger and the barbarian] often favors a spatial interpretation. Usually, according to the ideas of the given culture, alien forces are located outside its territorial boundaries. Being part of another culture is often interpreted as an absence of culture (LOTMAN, 1985 [1984], pp.138-139).¹⁷

¹⁴ It should be highlighted that although the Romans did not have much regard for contemporary Greeks (called *Graeculi*, which is despicable, insignificant, little Greeks), they felt the full force of the ancient Hellenic civilization—militarily inferior but culturally grand—and for this they felt profound admiration.

¹⁵ Original text in Italian: “Gli antichi Greci consideravano barbari i persiani e gli egiziani, che li superavano per la ricchezza della loro tradizione culturale, i romani consideravano barbari i cartaginesi e i greci. Le stirpi ariane, che avevano conquistato l’India, chiamavano col termine sanscrito *mleccha*, che ha alcune sfumature del greco βάρβαρος, le popolazioni originarie della valle del fiume Indo, creando così una situazione assolutamente falsa. Essendo cioè essi stessi dei barbari, essi accusavano di barbarie gli eredi delle civiltà precedenti. In seguito, in questo elenco di “spregevoli stranieri”, essi inserirono gli arabi, i turchi e i cinesi. Allo stesso modo gli arabi [...] utilizzarono la parola *adjami*, che aveva lo stesso significato di “barbaro”, per definire i persiani, eredi di quella antica e alta cultura contro la quale essi avevano lottato per l’influenza sul mondo musulmano.”

¹⁶ Original text in Italian: “un ‘esercito satanico’ perfido e passibile di annientamento.”

¹⁷ Original text in Italian: “Poiché la cultura è un concetto chiuso, essa presuppone necessariamente una non cultura ai suoi antipodi, che si colloca all’esterno del suo confine. [...] Ogni cultura si crea il suo tipo di “barbaro”. [il “trovarsi fuori” dell’estraneo e del barbaro] favorisce spesso un’interpretazione spaziale. Di solito, secondo le idee della cultura data, le forze extraculturali si trovano fuori dei suoi confini territoriali. L’appartenenza ad un’altra cultura è così interpretata spesso come assenza di cultura.”

We are then led by Lotman to always think about culture through a double, opposing viewpoint: centre and periphery, culture and non-culture, tradition and barbarity, own space and alien space. These are two instances of the same social-historical process, marked by the subjectivity of the adopted perspective and the unpredictability of its results since, Lotman notes, “The ‘barbarian’ of yesterday, which was outside [...] the boundaries [of culture], appears today on the outskirts of the culture and will be tomorrow at the center of cultural activity, which has undergone changes” (LOTMAN, 1985 [1984], p.140).¹⁸

The author offers these reflections at a time of historical transition and opening of the Soviet Union, when linguistic-cultural policies could be a means to promote the integration and acceptance of the “alien.” Russian-centrism had to give way to the variety of people that for a long time had been treated as subcultures and for decades had tried to defend their traditions and language.

It is not a surprise that, according to Lotman and Uspensky, the strengthening of the identity of the “foreigner” in the heart of a culture passes through language and, precisely, through the creation of sub-languages, which are incomprehensible to the centre:

The situation of *izgoynichestvo* stimulates the creation of argot. This is especially evident in cases when marginalization takes shape in community forms. The difference between social jargon and social dialect is that the former is not assimilated originally, but is acquired after entering into a certain social environment, where the verbal behavior (*rechevoe povedenie*) acts as a distinctive feature of the group (*sotsium*). Since an outcast sees himself as a foreigner, his sociolinguistic position is characterized by speaking in a “foreign” language (LOTMAN; USPENSKY, 2002 [1982], p.231).¹⁹

¹⁸ Original text in Italian: “il ‘barbaro’ di ieri, che si trovava fuori dei [...] confini [della cultura], appare oggi alla periferia della cultura e sarà domani al centro dell’attività culturale, che ha subito cambiamenti.”

¹⁹ Original text in Russian: “Положение изгойничества стимулирует создание аргота. Особенно отчетливо это проявляется в тех случаях, когда изгойничество отливается в корпоративные формы. Отличие социального жаргона от социального диалекта состоит в том, что первый не усваивается изначально, а приобретает при вступлении в некоторый социум, когда речевое поведение выступает как знак социума. Поскольку изгой сам на себя смотрит как на иностранца, его социолингвистическая позиция характеризуется говорением на “чужом” языке.”

The reflection on argot is very effective for introducing the topic of female migrant writing. The two women to whom this contribution is dedicated show in fact a vital need to include in their works (written in Italian) untranslatable and “inconceivable” words—a sort of literary argot—which have the purpose of highlighting their fundamental foreign identities. Igiaba Scego cannot pronounce the ineffective word “decadence” to tell the story of her family; she can only repeat the maternal expressions “*Hoog, balaayo, musiibo, kasaro, qalalaas*” (SCEGO, 2017, p.90), which were learned within the context of the family sayings that she breathed as a child.

This originality has made them subjects that are hardly classifiable within the classical Italian literary canon, which is often presented, in Lotmanian terms, as a “centre,” a closed, normative space where it is difficult for women to find a place. It is worth remembering that the now internationally established Italian writer, Elsa Morante, preferred to be called “the poet” (not poetess), using the pen name Antonio or Lorenzo, and Natalia Ginzburg commented regarding her writings from her youth: “at the time I wanted terribly to write like a man and I had a horror of anyone realizing from what I wrote that I was a woman” (GINZBURG, 1985, p.61). This is even more certain if the writer is a foreigner.

Elvira Dones and Igiaba Scego: Two Women Writers of the Border

An exile is a half a creature. Roots were torn off, life was mutilated, hope was gutted, the origin was removed, the identity was stripped. There seems to be nothing left (SCEGO, 2017, p.60).²⁰

The historical and conceptual framework that I have just presented opens the door to a phenomenon that runs across contemporary Italian literature, placing unprecedented questions on the very idea of the national canon (and culture) and on the possibilities of shifting public discourses on women voices—voices burned, silenced, and manipulated by millennia of history (SCEGO, 2017, p.58)—concerning thorny subjects that the public opinion does not want to hear.

²⁰ Original text in Italian: “L’esule è una creatura a metà. Le radici sono state strappate, la vita è stata mutilata, la speranza è stata sventrata, il principio è stato separato, l’identità è stata spogliata. Sembra non esserci rimasto niente.”

Just at a time when Europe is strengthening its borders, entrenching itself behind new and anachronistic nationalisms,²¹ migrant women and men are choosing the pen as a means to create original spaces for intercultural dialogues. This is the case of Elvira Dones, an Albanian writer who, in her novel *Sworn Virgin (Vergine giurata)*, written in 2007, introduces the figure of the *burrnesha*, a social “eventuality” completely alien to the culture of Western Europe but present in the neighboring Balkans (Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Dalmatian Zagora). It is about a woman who, as foreseen by the archaic Albanian customary law, the Kanun,²² made an eternal vow of chastity and changed her gender status. By wearing men’s clothes and gradually transforming her body through a codified set of male behaviours, the *burrnesha* aspired to live a more independent life, which would not have been allowed by the patriarchal system still in place in certain rural areas of the Balkans.²³ In many cases, it was the only way a woman could inherit her family’s wealth, have a job at a fair wage or support her loved ones if left without a male heir.

The novel tells the story of Hana, forced by life’s circumstances to become “the head of the family,” even if her dream was to study philology and become “a poet” (DONES, 2015, p.122).

Her uncle had hardly been able to breathe. There wasn’t a blade of grass for the animals to eat, and she, at nineteen, had Walt Whitman’s poems in her unopened suitcase. She wanted to get back to that book, but her uncle was there in front of her, more dead than alive. She was the only girl in the village enrolled in college. She hadn’t wanted children, all she had wanted was books. But in the mountains you couldn’t say these things if you were born a girl (DONES, 2015, p.44).²⁴

²¹ See Anna Triandafyllidou’s research on new national identities in the light of Migration Studies (TRIANDAFYLLIDOU, 2001, 2008) and on the female high-skill migration (TRIANDAFYLLIDOU; ISAAKYAN, 2016).

²² See Cara & Margjeka (2015).

²³ In the chapter Sexuality from the documentary series *Taboo*, produced by National Geographic, the writer and anthropologist Antonia Young—author of *Women who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins* (YOUNG, 2000)—interviewed the sworn virgins who currently live in Albania. The custom survives in this country but is extinct in Dalmatia and Bosnia and is now in its final days in Montenegro. It is estimated that there are currently 100 sworn virgins left in the world, most of whom are older women.

²⁴ Original text in Italian: “lo zio respirava a fatica, le bestie non avevano nemmeno più un filo d’erba da mangiare e lei, allora diciannovenne, aveva nella valigia non ancora aperta un libro di poesie di Walt Whitman. Voleva tornare da quel libro, ma lo zio era lì di fronte a lei, più morto che vivo. Era l’unica

To avoid disappointing her dying uncle and leaving the Doda family without an heir but, instead, with deep social shame (and after suffering an attempted rape), Hana renames herself Mark. Her voice gets deeper and hoarser, she starts smoking like a chimney, drinking grappa and walking around with a rifle, thus embodying markedly male stereotypes.

So a new life begins, leading Hana/Mark to experience the paradoxical condition of *izgoinichestvo*, as a result of her tenacious willingness to be part of the culture, that is to say, of the space “illuminated by tradition” (LOTMAN; USPENSKY, 2002 [1982], p.227).²⁵ It is precisely this adhesion that makes her feel like an outcast, an *izgoi*. Her outer figure is socially integrated, but her inner self (body, emotions, memories, sensitivity, will, desires) is eradicated in a condition of incommunicability and isolation.

Her false, imposed masculinity becomes a boundary that creates a space of misunderstanding and apathy around her: “Why did you do it?,” is the question that everyone asks.

“It has been hard,” she answers, smiling. “No, I correct myself, it’s been hell.” [...] “You can’t talk about your own death. Find me a dead body that has succeeded and I’ll take my hat off to it” (DONES, 2015, pp.156-157).²⁶

Culture, by incorporating her into its codes and discourses, transforms her into a pariah, a babbling creature, an amorphous being, alien to herself. At the end of the slow path that leads her to leave “Mark,” a path marked by the plea “please, there’s no rush,” Hana breaks the sworn virgin oath and discovers her body again, breaking the nucleus of death, apathy and ugliness that had taken hold of her during seventeen years of captivity:

Hana tries to bring her attention back to her body. The man that she thought would still be tenaciously inhabiting her is no longer there.

ragazza del villaggio iscritta all’Università. Lei non voleva avere bambini, voleva solo i libri. Ma in mezzo a quelle montagne questo non potevi dirlo, se eri nata donna.”

²⁵ Original text in Russian: “освещенным традицией”.

²⁶ Original text in Italian: “‘È stata dura,’ risponde [Hana] sorridendo. ‘No,’ ci ripensa, ‘è stato l’inferno.’ [...] ‘Non si può raccontare la propria morte. Trovami un cadavere che ci sia riuscito e io mi levo il cappello.’”

That man was only a carapace. Lila [the cousin] was right: Mark Doda's life had been no more than the sum total of the masculine gestures Hana had forced herself to imitate, in the skin worn leathery by bad food and lack of attention. Mark Doda had been a product of her iron will (DONES, 2015, p.137).²⁷

With this novel, as in others — I am thinking in particular of *Burnt Sun* (*Sole bruciato*), published in Albanian in 2000 under the title *Yjet nuk vishen kështu* and in Italian in 2001, and *Perfect Little War* (*Piccola guerra perfetta*), written in Italian and published in 2011 — Elvira Dones presents in a contemporary Italian narrative a hurtful look at a woman who is enriched by the experience of her *strange otherness*: a woman herself, a writer, expatriate, witness and complainant of the suffering that migration has inflicted on Albanian women in the 1990s and to which very little voice has been given. It is no coincidence that the *body* is one of her privileged subjects, where the deposit of the physical and psychological scars with which the violence of prostitution and war (the systematic war violations in Yugoslavia and Kosovo as an instrument of ethnic cleansing) has marked women.²⁸ She, as with other women writers, tries to claim a public discursive space in which a migrant woman is presented with her load of traumas that most likely cannot be healed (often due to lack of the adequate care in the new host country). In *Perfect Little War* the atrocious description of the violence experienced by a little Kosovar girl is “counterbalanced” by public opinion:

Meanwhile, Europe is terrified: it fears that at the end of the war, instead of returning to their burned houses, the homeless of Kosovo end up flooding it as the Albanians did after the collapse of the communist regime (DONES, 2011, p.155).²⁹

²⁷ Original text in Italian: “Hana cerca di riportare l’attenzione sul proprio corpo. L’uomo che temeva potesse tenacemente resistere in lei non c’è più. Quell’uomo era solo crosta di superficie, [la cugina] Lila aveva ragione, Mark Doda era vissuto solo nei gesti maschili che Hana si era sforzata di imitare, nella pelle rovinata dal cibo cattivo e dalla mancanza di attenzioni. Mark Doda era stato il prodotto della sua ferrea volontà.”

²⁸ For an in-depth look at Elvira Dones’s bibliography, see Livezeanu *et al.* (2007).

²⁹ Original text in Italian: “Intanto l’Europa è terrorizzata: teme che a Guerra conclusa, invece di fare ritorno alle loro case bruciate, i senzatetto del Kosovo finiscano per inondarla come hanno fatto gli albanesi dopo il tracollo del regime comunista.”

If in Elvira Dones it is imperative to reflect on women in the context of the Albanian migratory exodus initiated after the Soviet implosion, then in a writer like Igiaba Scego the heart and poetics of her writing is in the reflection on postcolonial identities.³⁰

In the autobiographical book *My Home is Where I Am (La mia casa è dove sono)*, written in 2010, Scego tells the story of her family, forced to flee Somalia due to the socialist dictatorship that followed Italian colonization. Reflecting on the diaspora of her loved ones, scattered throughout Europe, Scego observes: “Each of us had a different Western citizenship in our pockets, but in our hearts we had the pain of the same loss. We mourned the Somalia lost in a war that we could not understand” (SCEGO, 2017, p.16),³¹ a war caused, after all, by the desire to find an African identity again after years of colonialist oppression.

In Mussolini’s Mogadishu, “Italy was everywhere, in the names of the streets, in the faces of the rejected half-breeds” (SCEGO, 2017, p.30),³² in the imposed language, in the modified maps, in the schools that taught an alien culture:

Maybe both I and he [my brother / cousin] would have to study other things: our African history, for example. Instead Africans always study the history of others. So we were convinced that we were descendants of the Romans or the Gauls instead of the Yoruba and the ancient Egyptians. The colonial school sowed doubts and lacerations in us (SCEGO, 2017, p.28).³³

Writing becomes the means through which Scego seeks to call for a debate on the inaction that has characterized Italian postcolonial reflection, which was never thoroughly analyzed or was simply confronted with soft and condescending tones:

³⁰ In this perspective, Elvira Dones is not strictly a post-colonial author because, unlike other colleagues coming from the “Horn of Africa, such as Maria Viarengo, Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ubx Ali Farah, Kaha Mohamed Aden” (MANETTI; RICALDONE, 2011, p.135), her poetics does not aim so much “to explore the ‘imperial archives’” of the Italian predatory past but to denounce the marks that ethnic, political, geographical, psychic conflicts can leave on the body and on the soul of people.

³¹ Original text in Italian: “In tasca ognuno di noi aveva una diversa cittadinanza occidentale. Nel cuore invece avevamo il dolore della stessa perdita. Piangevamo la Somalia persa per una guerra che stentavamo a capire.”

³² Original text in Italian: “L’Italia stava dappertutto nei nomi delle vie, nei volti dei meticci rifiutati.”

³³ Original text in Italian: “Forse sia io che lui avremmo dovuto studiare altre cose: la nostra storia africana, per esempio. Invece gli africani sempre a studiare la storia degli altri. E così ci si convinceva di discendere dai romani o dai galli invece che dagli Yoruba e dagli antichi egizi. La scuola coloniale seminava in noi dubbi e lacerazioni.”

Italy had forgotten its colonial past. It had failed to remember that it had put Somalis, Eritreans, Libyans, and Ethiopians through hell. It had cancelled that piece of history with an easy, clean slate.

This does not mean that Italians were worse than other colonizing people. However, they were like the others. The Italians raped, killed, mocked, polluted, plundered, and humiliated the populations with whom they came into contact. They did like the English, French, Belgian, German, American, Spanish, and Portuguese colonialists. Yet, in many of these countries, after the end of the Second World War, there was a discussion, people came to blows, and the exchanges of views were harsh and impetuous; the question about imperialism and its crimes had been raised; many studies were published and the debate influenced literary, non-fiction, film and music production. Instead, Italy ruled the silence, as if nothing had happened (SCEGO, 2017, p.20).³⁴

The Italian-African writer wants to give a voice to the neglected people (especially women) who are a product of migrations and who are hidden in the cracks of the borders,³⁵ making them feel exiled without a centre, like an amorphous mass accumulated in the *non-places* of the cities. This voice in search of dialogue and recognition is even stronger today in light of a highly problematic migration situation in Italy—in which, for example, the stereotype of the (parasitic) low-skilled migrant is very widespread—, a crescent populism, and a tendency to ghettoize *different people* especially through a non-inclusive manipulation of the urban fabric.

In fact, it is in the station, the *unlivable place*—using the words of Lotman and Uspensky (2002 [1982], p.227)—, where the Scego girl discovers that in her home town, Rome, an avalanche of Somali immigrants is rotting in the melancholy of the lost world, in the *buufis*.³⁶

³⁴ Original text in Italian: “l’Italia si era dimenticata del suo passato coloniale. Aveva dimenticato di aver fatto subire l’inferno a somali, eritrei, libici ed etiopi. Aveva cancellato quella storia con un facile colpo di spugna. Questo non significa che gli italiani siano stati peggio di altri popoli colonizzatori. Ma erano come gli altri. Gli italiani hanno stuprato, ucciso, sbeffeggiato, inquinato, depredato, umiliato i popoli con cui sono venuti a contatto. Hanno fatto come gli inglesi, i francesi, i belgi, i tedeschi, gli americani, gli spagnoli, i portoghesi. Ma in molti di questi paesi dopo la fine della Seconda guerra mondiale c’è stata una discussione, ci si è accapigliati, gli scambi di vedute sono stati aspri e impetuosi; ci si è interrogati sull’imperialismo e i suoi crimini; sono stati pubblicati studi; il dibattito ha influenzato la produzione letteraria, saggistica, filmica, musicale. In Italia invece silenzio. Come se nulla fosse stato.”

³⁵ See also Scego (2008) and Scego (2015).

³⁶ See Horst (2006) and Jinnah (2017).

For years I felt threatened by the burden of pain and hope that [the station] Termini embodied. I wanted to be somewhere else besides that place. I perceived it as an obstacle to my formation. I didn't know yet that a peaceful life could not ignore it, because my origins were placed there, because my umbilical cord was buried there. In Mexico, a legend says that the house is the place where the umbilical cord is buried, the source from which you took nourishment before you were born. So maybe my house was the Termini station, the origin that I shouldn't forget (SCEGO, 2017, pp.105-106).³⁷

It is impossible not to think of what Henri Lefebvre wrote about the organizing function of the space currently operated by the European states. The look of the old continent today no longer extends outwards—in search of others' lands—but inwards, and one of its main activities is to reconstruct space, regularize flows, and control networks (LEFEBVRE, 1991, p.383), thus expanding its ability to influence and surveil the space occupied by migrants.

What moves those who undertake a journey towards an alien land is the search for a *specific place* that is anything but the “organized” space that actually awaits them. It is the search for the *house*, that meaningful place, suspended in time and space, where, Scego writes, the fragrance of ginger coffee, the intense taste of a *beer iyo muufo* or a *bariis iskukaris* or the sound of the mother's song (*Sheeko sheeko sheeko xariir*, which means *Once upon a time*) is enough for the outcasts to find a faded image of their roots.³⁸

Conclusions

Many of those who worked closely with Lotman have witnessed how scientific thinking in him was never an exercise of the mind as an end in itself, but an existential activity put at the service of his people.³⁹ The *barbarian* who “appears today on the

³⁷ Original text in Italian: “Per anni mi sono sentita minacciata dal carico di dolore e speranza che [la stazione] Termini si portava addosso. Volevo essere altro da lei. La percepivo come un ostacolo alla mia formazione. Non sapevo ancora che una vita serena non poteva prescindere da lei. Perché lì c'era il mio principio. Perché lì era seppellito il mio cordone ombelicale. In Messico una leggenda dice che la casa è il luogo in cui seppelliscono il cordone ombelicale da cui hai tratto il nutrimento prima di nascere. Allora forse la mia casa era la stazione Termini. Il principio che non dovevo dimenticare.”

³⁸ As in Dones, we find the *body*, which in African culture is a builder of the community space, a space impregnated with the sensations, smells, sounds, tastes, and shared colors that are part of one's personal and cultural identity.

³⁹ See Kiseliëva (2005).

periphery of culture and tomorrow will be at the centre of cultural activity” (LOTMAN, 1985 [1984], p.140)⁴⁰ is an enunciation that brings in itself the experience of a lifetime. From the condition of silence and vigilance in which he wrote in the sixties, Lotman comes to give, in the period from 1986 to 1991, a series of educational television lectures to “sow the reasonable, the good, the eternal” (LOTMAN, 1995, p.49)⁴¹ among the disoriented people in the face of the progressive disintegration of the Soviet Union and the consequent and unprecedented scenarios of geopolitical, economic, social and cultural-linguistic reconstruction.

On the trail of the reflections of the Russian semiotician, we have seen how Elvira Dones and Igiaba Scego tried to give space to the voices of those at the bottom, and in particular to those of women, demanding literature to act like an urgent call to all the situations of *izgoinichestvo* that mark the contemporary era. If *exile is half a creature*, border literature can become a medium to repair fractures, heal wounds and recover the sense of origin and integrity — or the principle of unity, as the Italian-African author calls it — that constitutes the inner self of each person from birth.

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⁴⁰ Original text in Italian: “appare oggi alla periferia della cultura e sarà domani al centro dell’attività culturale.”

⁴¹ Original text in Russian: “стремились ‘сеять разумное, доброе, вечное.’”

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