

ARTICLE

Reflections on Identity: Lacanian Lack and Desire in Igiaba Scego's *Rhoda*

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SUMMARY

This article examines the novel *Rhoda* (2004) by the prolific Italian-Somali writer, Igiaba Scego, through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The protagonist's defining of her marginalized, migrant identity against the culturally generated *imago* of an integrated, Italian identity shares a dynamic with Lacan's theorizing of the child's transition from the pre-linguistic imaginary order to the symbolic order. Scego's novel exposes how colonialism and its postcolonial aftereffects structure cultural discourses in terms of lack and desire. Scego further shows how Italy's conflictual integration of migrants represents an ongoing social narrative in which the inheritance of colonial attitudes continues to play out.

KEYWORDS: migration, Italy – migration literature – Igiaba Scego – migrant writers, Italy – African-Italian writers – post-colonialism and Italy – Jacques Lacan – Lacan, desire – Lacan, lack – symbolic order – mirror stage

Desire is always what is inscribed as a repercussion of the articulation of language at the level of the Other.

— Jacques Lacan (*My Teaching* 38)

Despite the general lack of public discussion regarding Italy's colonial enterprises in Africa, repercussions in current social practices and discourses evidence how Italy's colonial attitudes and actions still impact contemporary society (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2-10). Italy's colonial involvement played a critical role in the nation-building project from the first Italian colonial forays during the nineteenth century until the loss of the African colonies with the Treaty of Paris in 1947 (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2). Indeed, Italy's current conflictual political practices regarding migration and uneasy social integration of migrants represent an ongoing social narrative in which the inheritance of colonial attitudes and history continue to play out (Andall and Duncan, *Italian Colonialism*).

The problematic incorporation of migrants into Italy's national territory is the focus of many works by the prolific Italian-Somali writer, Igiaba Scego. Recipient of multiple awards, including the prestigious Mondello prize in 2011, Scego's novels and short stories chronicle the difficulties surrounding the formation of an identity by those who, by virtue of having migrated to Italy, become "other" due to race, religion, and/or ethnicity. Her early novel *Rhoda* (2004) traces the unsuccessful attempts by the titular protagonist to reconcile her Somali identity with her status as "other" in Italy (Somali, Muslim, black) after migrating to Italy at age 16. The novel's

unconventional structure, based on a chorus of five narrative voices, continually emphasizes how identity is not a unitary entity but rather a fluid construct both formed and challenged by others' perceptions and by affective relationships.

The protagonist's defining of her marginalized, migrant identity against the culturally generated *imago* of an integrated, Italian identity shares a dynamic with Lacan's theorizing of the critical period in the child's identity formation as it transitions from the pre-linguistic imaginary order and enters the symbolic order and the realm of language. The mirror stage is this brief transitional period "which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality" (*Écrits* 4), a relation that Lacan theorizes as being structured by desire and lack. His theorizing of ego formation as being structured in terms of what the individual lacks, and hence desires, has significant implications for understanding the interstitial identities of postcolonial subjects. Lacan holds that subjectivity emerges from the identification-alienation duality that the child experiences in the pre-linguistic state when it sees its image in the mirror and both identifies with it, but at the same time "misrecognizes" (*méconnaissances*) that image as unified and ideal (*Écrits* 1-10). In Scego's novel, the migrant's identity is defined and ultimately destroyed by the protagonist's desire to overcome that difference she perceives between the *imago* and the self. The ego construct that Lacan describes is essentially flawed and fictive in nature, and parallels the fundamentally fictive nature of the migrant's identity construct. Transitioning from the mirror stage to the symbolic order also requires the child to distinguish itself as an entity that is distinct from the mother, and brings about the individual's forever-unrealized longing for re-unification with the Real and the *jouissance* it experienced when suckled and nourished by the mother. In Scego's novel, the migrant's longing to find belonging runs parallel to the child's longing for the Real, forever unfulfilled.

Reading this novel through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis reveals the dynamics of the signification of cultural discourses that structure desire and the dominant fictions that inform identity construction in terms of lack. Colonialism and its postcolonial aftereffects disrupt signification of identity in a Lacanian way (to the extent that identity is based on belonging) by the imposition of the discourses or an order that makes the promise of a pure, non-disrupted belonging always already absent and forever unrecoverable. Colonialism disrupts the sense of community and belonging, in that it removes identity from the realm of the Real and renders opaque the structures of identity formation that were previously transparent. Colonialism creates lack, and imposes the discourses through which desire functions to exclude the colonized from entering the symbolic order of integration, the very order that purports to overcome lack.

In Scego's work, the character Rhoda shares the developmental position with the infant transitioning from the mirror stage to the realm of language in that her identity within the symbolic order is as yet unformed. She has been separated from her biological mother (who has died) as well as from her mother country, Somalia. This double absence occasions in her that lack described by Lacan as the force that structures the unconscious and drives desire. For Rhoda, the subject formation that takes place during the mirror stage in which the infant recognizes her- or himself as other, is complicated by how social discourses in Italy assign her the status of black, migrant "other" and (de)value her accordingly. The fulfillment of her desire to construct a socially valid subjectivity that harmoniously allows for both her Somali past and Italian present, like the infant's desire for unity with the Real, is always elusive and unattainable. However, as the protagonist moves toward the symbolic order of social integration, it becomes evident that, like the impossible union with the

Real, Rhoda's desire will never be fulfilled, for, as the novel reveals, subjectivity is a fiction structured by the flawed perceptions of others.

According to Lacan, subjectivity is always intersubjectivity, formed and also challenged through affective relationships (Ragland-Sullivan 122-126). Identity is therefore slippery in that it relies upon the unreliable perceptions of others. In Scego's novel, this slippery feature is underscored by how the multiple narrative voices reveal each other's perceptions as faulty. The novel is divided into five sections. Within each of these sections, the five principal characters write their stories and the Rhoda character is formed by the intersection of their narrations and interpretations reminiscent of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. At first glance, the novel takes on the appearance of a multi-voiced diary: the first entry in each section is always by Aisha, younger sister of Rhoda. Her narrative is then followed by Pino, the young man from Naples whose unrequited love for Rhoda spurs him to help her. The third voice is Barni Nur, Rhoda's maternal aunt and surrogate mother who speaks together in the same chapters with Faduma Aden, Barni's best friend and second surrogate mother to Rhoda. The final voice in each section is Rhoda's, who is dead, but who writes a narrative that runs parallel to those of the other characters.

Ostensibly, each story is highly individualistic and entries are dated: Aisha's are all suspended in July, 2003, Pino's cover a two-year time span, while Barni and Faduma's entries occur over a six-month period that bridges the respective entries by Aisha and Pino. Rhoda's narratives bear titles with a variation of the question, "Does time matter?" This narrative polyphony is further complicated by Rhoda's voice writing back to the other characters, literally from the grave. At the end of each section, Rhoda tells her own story, and it is here the reader learns that Rhoda has already died. Her narration at times corroborates and at times contradicts the perceptions of the other characters. Because she is writing from the grave, Rhoda's story claims to stand outside of linear time: it is not told from past to present, nor is it told in reverse. The reader is asked to reconstruct a linear story from the clues given by all the characters, and as facts from the present are revealed, those facts rewrite the meaning of events that occurred earlier. With this structure of separate voices that comment on and contradict each other, Scego calls into question those interpretive forces that structure meaning: perception and time, and even the implicit assumption that subjectivity depends upon a temporal linearity, or that identity is constructed over time.

Scego's narrators create a refracted point of view, and thus raise the issue of the authority of the narrator's voice. The text functions more as five separate monologues than one unfolding dialogue. The characters' conversations become tenuously interconnected only over time, as the same events recur within each narrative. Who is to be believed if all present different versions of those events? To further complicate the issue, the narratives of the characters are in the third person, with the exception of Rhoda's, who speaks in the first person. The traditional assumption of objectivity associated with using the third person is repeatedly brought into conflict with the autobiographical authority of the first person, while multiple points of view destabilize the notion of unitary authority.

In each of the characters' entries, there is a contrast of signifying: what the words say contradicts what meaning is created. The characters all claim to see a certain image of Rhoda, but that image is not reflected in their words. Instead, it is mirrored by their desire: Aisha's entries describe in detail Rhoda's empty room, various brief encounters as Rhoda leaves, and Aisha's dates with Pino so she can talk about the absent Rhoda. Aisha's narrative insistence that she and her sister share a unique closeness is a reflection of her desire for that closeness. Similarly, Pino's entries

reflect what he desires Rhoda to be, the object to be loved, pure and chaste, from afar. However, his own narrative reveals a context that contrasts sharply with the image he has of Rhoda: in romantic tones he describes seeing her from a distance, being struck by her beauty and sophisticated bearing, and falling in love with her at first sight. But at the same time Pino's narrative reveals that he first meets Rhoda when she is soliciting in a squalid area of Naples and he is working as a volunteer that aides prostitutes.

The narratives of the two surrogate mothers also revolve around Rhoda in terms of desire and lack. Both women have the same desires for Rhoda, the so-called "migrant dream" that she will complete school, and become established and integrated in the host country, but still remain devoted to her family's religion, and retain her connection to her home country. In recounting Rhoda's story of migration, the narratives of the surrogate mothers, Barni and Faduma ultimately tell their own stories: Rhoda and her younger sister are orphaned in Somalia. Due to the dangers of the civil war, when Rhoda is 16 and Aisha is 10, they are sent to live in Rome with their mother's sister, Barni, who works as a maid and attendant to the elderly. In their mourning over Rhoda's unused talents, and former religious devotion, her aunt and Faduma likewise underscore Rhoda's current condition of "donna perduta" ("lost woman"). Indeed, Rhoda is "lost" multiple times: she is lost to her home country after migrating, she is lost to her aunts and sister when she moves from Rome to Naples, she is lost into prostitution, she is lost into illness when she contracts AIDS, she is lost to her loved ones in Italy when she returns to Somalia, and ultimately she is lost to life, killed in a street fight in Mogadishu.

"Lack" plays a key role in the novel, and the characters' relationships to that "lack" repeatedly reveal the constructed nature of identity and subjectivity. On a narrative level, Rhoda herself functions as "lack" for the other characters, for it is their desire for her to be or do things she cannot that structures the narratives and identities of the other four characters: Aunt Barni feels that if Rhoda were to be a dutiful daughter, all of Barni's sacrifices in coming to Italy would be justified; for Aisha, a close relationship with Rhoda would also represent a connection to their heritage and Somali past that Aisha was too young to remember well; and Pino wishes for Rhoda to fulfill his romantic dreams of marriage and family. All are disappointed. In addition, it is her condition of being physically absent to all the characters—she's dead—that structures their stories and forms the *locus* of the narrative. By creating Rhoda's identity through the contradictory narratives of others, Scego underscores the prismatic nature of subjectivity, and portrays the notion of a unitary identity as unattainable, as a fiction. How the characters write, re-write, and re-construct each others' perceptions of Rhoda serves not to construct her identity, but to re-construct, re-evaluate, and re-structure the readers' notions of how identity is formed by lack, misrecognition, and webs of signification.

According to Lacan, the critical developmental moment in the mirror stage is the individual's *méconnaissance* of the *imago*, which is perceived as unitary and complete: "The role of the mirror apparatus [is critical] in the appearance of the *double*, in which psychological realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested" (*Écrits* 3). The *imago* functions as Gestalt (*Écrits* 3), as a pattern that structures action. Mark Bracher rightly points out that it is important to remember how desire functions in the subjective economy, for desire "can take the form of either the desire to *be* or the desire to *have*" (19). The unitary, complete image that the child perceives leads to desire for the image, or to be the object of another's desire. Hence, the *imago* acts as a double for the child (Bracher 3). This doubling further fragments the identity based on desire, because desire is now

structured not only by what the subject lacks and desires, but also by what the subject perceives others to lack and desire. This fragmentation increasingly decenters the subject, and amplifies the impossibility of fulfillment.

In Scego's novel, the female characters act as doubles for one another, and the discrepancies between the women's perceptions of their doubles and what the doubles themselves perceive underscore how desire structures the formation of subjectivity, and also serve to destabilize the concept of unitary identity. Each partner in the double believes that the other partner has achieved what the first person lacks, what the first person desires. Thus identity becomes a chain of signification of lack linked through multiple *imagos*. The multiplicity of characters, each functioning as each others' *imago*, further decenters the very decentering that is the mirror stage's misrecognition. The initial mirrored reflection of selfhood is shown to be comprised only of receding reflections in a hall of mirrors, no more in possession of the real image than the original subject. The narratives of the novel's other characters only exacerbate the destabilization of Rhoda's identity; their "reflections" on Rhoda's identity reveal only the slippage of lack behind lack.

The other characters consider Aunt Barni and her best friend Faduma to be interchangeable (they refer to them in unison as "le vecchie" ["the old ladies"], and equate them with Somalia and its traditions as both are devout Muslims and both fill the role of the self-sacrificing mother); Barni, however, perceives herself as deficient and Faduma as the apex of perfection: Barni considers herself the failed mother, her Rhoda is a "donna perduta," while Faduma is the successful mother of two sons, both devoutly religious and studying medicine in Germany. Barni feels she is trapped by family obligations, and resents having to work as a virtual slave in Italy while Faduma is free to choose to leave Italy and could go live with her perfect children. Barni sees herself as hardened, withdrawn, and Faduma as open and warm, and above all, integrated. But Barni's perceptions stand in contrast to how Faduma sees herself. Faduma does not consider herself a successful parent for, unbeknownst to Barni, she travels to Naples and tries to persuade Rhoda to give up her life on the streets and come home. Rhoda rejects her violently, and Faduma then feels partly responsible for Rhoda's demise. Nor does Faduma perceive herself as integrated, at least not in comparison to other Somali women. Nura Hussein has lived in Italy somewhat longer than Faduma, and is equally comfortable with Italian and Somali cultural practices. As she compares herself to her friend Nura Hussein, Faduma feels old-fashioned and out of touch with Italian customs: "Nura Hussein era troppo avanti a lei. La guardò bene come si guardano certi esemplari rari. 'Ecco come sono gli integrati', pensò. Sì, gli integrati per Faduma erano come Nura" (107).¹

Aisha and Rhoda, too, function as doubles for one another: on a physical level, they look similar enough to be twins, but in character they are opposites. Aisha idolizes everything about Rhoda, and without irony refers to her as "principessa" ("princess") and "santa" ("saint") (89); she wishes to imitate everything about Rhoda, her dress, her tastes, her habits. In her turn, Rhoda sees her younger sister as more open, more "complete," more integrated: "Aisha cercava di capire quella gente. Discuteva, litigava, ma trovava sempre un punto di contatto. Noi eravamo diverse, non integrate come lei" (119).² The *imago* that is desired is the integrated identity, and the female characters identify with and feel the distance from the characters they perceive to be integrated. However, integration means different things for each character, and proves to be elusive and slippery. Identity is destabilized by the circular regression of slippage and deferral, and thus in Scego's novel the signifying chain of postcolonial displacement becomes evident. Perhaps the most salient signifier of lack for the migrant is integration. Each character thinks the double more

integrated than the self, echoing endlessly the retreat of the *imago*. Because of the displaced status of the immigrant, Rhoda stands in the novel not only for the absence of any signified in terms of her own identity (she is deceased), but for the difficulty of a colonized people to ground its identity in a stable signifier. Rhoda's "donna perduta" is also Somalia "perduta."

This is perhaps clearest in the doubling between Rhoda and Barni, for it takes on national resonances: "Io per [zia Barni] ero la tradizione che prosperava, gli usi e costumi che non sarebbero spariti. Io per lei ero la Somalia perduta . . .Mi diceva sempre: 'Rhoda, tu sei come me'" (118-119).³ Both are represented as being attached to Muslim practices and Somali food and traditions, and as being ill at ease in Italy. Rhoda claims that both she and Aunt Barni are unified by their rejection of native Italians, to whom she refers with the Somali term "*gaal*" meaning "white": "Anche nell'odio verso i *gaal* eravamo accomunate, non li capivamo e non li volevamo capire" (118).⁴ Even in death, Rhoda functions as *imago* for her surrogate mother: Barni's first entry after Rhoda's death is dedicated to a rebirth, her own after Rhoda's death. Barni finds new purpose in opening a store, an ethnic boutique established with a young Italian woman, Sandra, who was Rhoda's schoolmate. The store is located in Primavalle, an area of Rome known for its high degree of racial and ethnic diversity, but also equated with urban decline. The store signals a series of renewals—Barni's own new direction, the urban renewal of the area with new businesses, the new collaboration between native Italians and migrants. The store is named "Rhoda."

L'insegna emanava luce come un astro disperso nel firmamento . . .era formata di cinque lettere.

Un nome.

Un dolore.

Cinque lettere che racchiudevano più destini. Incluso il suo.

Barni non credeva di essere la padrona di un negozio.

Di non essere più a servizio . . .

Di essere finalmente una integrata.

Ma l'insegna lo dimostrava. Il negozio "etnico" Rhoda era una realtà e quell'insegna dai colori pastello ne era la chiara dimostrazione.⁵(185)

For Barni, the sign of the store's name is also a sign of her own becoming integrated. However, the very sign that remembers Rhoda also attests to her lack. In addition, the fact that Rhoda's name has become the name of an ethnic store recalls Rhoda's earlier role in the economy of buying and selling, in which she herself was the merchandise. Employing a physical, literal sign in the store window is a conscious technique for alluding to the role of the character as a sign in the signifying system explored in the novel. This store sign is a name, and naming belongs to the symbolic order wherein language mediates the experience of reality. Rhoda is now part of the symbolic order, but only when she is reduced to her name. The sign only marks, like a gravestone, the absence of what it signifies, and its connection with the world of commerce, of buying and selling, invokes the history of colonization in which the identities of entire nations were remade through discourses, entire systems of signification, in the service of an economic exchange itself based on desire and perceived lack. And the chain of unfulfilled desire, revealed by the fact that the women of the novel cannot unify with the social order because the social order is rooted in the symbolic order, suggests also that the symbolic order of identity construction is, for these Somali women, itself rooted in the larger symbolic order of colonial history and its after effects.

None of the characters feels this more than Rhoda. Not only is her character too reflected in—and thus frustrated by—the perceptions of others, but the symbolic order in which she wishes to enter is overlaid with the over-order of European postcolonialism. This is evident as she directly confronts the issue of how her identity has been formed by the visions others have of her:

Ero stata oppressa dal luogo comune. Nessuno mi permetteva . . . di essere Rhoda Ismail, semplicemente Rhoda Ismail, una ragazza come tante, non speciale, non unica, non straordinaria. Ognuno mi voleva a imagine e somiglianza di qualcosa che di fatto non potevo essere io . . .

Ero secondo i casi, la studentessa modello, la sorella perfetta, l'amica fedele, la nipote irreprensibile, la schiava devota.⁶(162)

The roles that others have assigned to her—perfect sister, faithful friend—in harsh contrast to the roles she believes that society has assigned to her as a black woman, either superstar or “*donna perduta*.” This second set of signifiers marks her situation vis-à-vis the overarching discourses of postcolonial Italy.⁷

Rhoda feels she is trapped, “*non avevo scampo*” (“I was without escape”) (162) in the process of naming. The names provided by the symbolic order for someone of her gender and race prevent her subjectivity formation. She has been trapped into the roles the symbolic order allows her. She can enter the symbolic order, but only as named, or “*etichettata*” (“labeled”) (162) by that order. This is the reason she gives for her decision to reverse the traditional direction that migration has taken in Italy: she moves from the center, Rome, to the periphery in Naples, from North to South, and she decides to “*arrendermi*” (“surrender”) (162) to the symbolic order of signification by actively choosing to accept the name and adjoining role of prostitute.

Rhoda’s decision to enter sex work of her own free choice could be interpreted as an act of self-affirmation and independence, co-opting the role and name assigned to her but making it her own. Activists and liberal feminist scholars have argued that for women who are not coerced or forced into prostitution, the choice to work in the sex industry is a liberatory act, an expression of female empowerment, and even a way to resist traditional patriarchal strictures on female choice and sexuality (Chapkis; Duggan and Hunter; Nussbaum; Schwarzenbach). This view however neglects to address the fundamentally unequal power positions occupied by client and sex worker (Steinem 219-221), and also neglects to acknowledge the economic and racial implications of those imbalances. Typically it is the disenfranchised that “choose” prostitution because their choices were already limited by other social forces or constrained by economic desperation, if not coerced by specific individuals. “In an unequal world,” Julia O’Connell Davidson points out, the choice to enter prostitution is “*classed, gendered, and raced*” (93). Indeed, the “*essence of the prostitution contract is that the prostitute . . . must, at least during working hours, assume her or himself as the Other, fix her or himself as an object, in order that everyone else may always be able to satisfy their erotic ‘needs’ on demand*” (Davidson 91). The argument that would call the choice to prostitute the self an act of independence or an expression of resistance to patriarchal discourses of power fails to prove how that resistance alters the hierarchy of power or how that resistance is realized when the other actors in the exchange don’t recognize the resistance as such.

In the context of this novel, Rhoda’s acceptance of the name “prostitute” assigned to her by the symbolic order is ultimately self-destructive rather than self-affirming. She has chosen the

position of Object, but that choice does not resist the forces of domination; rather it reconfirms them by perpetuating the cycle of domination and exploitation. Indeed, Rhoda does not consider herself liberated by her choice; rather, she sees herself as “lost.” If language signifies only lack, then Rhoda’s surrender to the symbolic order via her becoming an object of desire for the other, her subsumption into the signifying order, is accomplished at the cost of her becoming the lack behind her own signification. The term “*donna perduta*” is a value judgment, but it is also a tenet of Lacanian signification in Rhoda’s case.

The objectification and consumption of another person that typifies prostitution resonates with wider meaning. Rhoda directly aligns her position of labeled, trapped outsider with the position of southern Italians within Italy:

La mia situazione mi ricordava molto quella di Gaetano in *Ricomincio da tre* . . . Il protagonista del film, come me, fuggiva le etichette. Se n’era andato un po’ a Firenze, a cambiare aria, a fare un viaggio . . . Ma la gente non credeva che un napoletano potesse farsi un viaggio tanto per fare. Era impossibile. Impensabile. Una bestemmia atroce. Il napoletano deve emigrare, così era scritto e così doveva essere . . . Gaetano poteva essere poche cose: un camorrista, un cantante di canzoni sdolcinate . . . lui era condannato e lo ero anch’io.⁸(162)

The stereotype or “*etichetta*” of the southern Italian as migrant hails from the massive internal migration by southern Italians to work in northern factories during the 1950s and 1960s, but their formulation as inferior and racially other began with the Risorgimento and continues to persist (Ascoli and von Henneberg 7-11). Indeed, Pasquale Verdicchio has argued that the programmatic construction of southern Italians as uncivilized and racially other was an essential element in the colonization of southern Italy by northern Italy during and after Unification, and the rhetorical means by which that colonization was justified (29-36).⁹

The parallel between Rhoda and the internal southern Italian migrant emphasizes the power of language in constructing the proscriptive roles and limiting discourses that “condemn” migrants: the act of a Neapolitan trying to move outside the stereotype is a “*bestemmia*” (“blasphemy”); his destiny as migrant is “*scritto*” (“written”) and thus must be so, “*così doveva essere.*” Even in the case of native Italians, the identity of the migrant is frustrated by the fact that that identity has already been claimed—conscripted—by lack and desire. To be a migrant is to lack the Real of a homeland. The signifying chain of postcolonial identity construction via lack and desire will not let the migrant forget this. By expanding the discourse on exclusions to include Italy’s internal migrants, Scego reveals that the Lacanian economy of signification, lack, and desire as it relates to identity extends also to natives of Italy who have been named by a system of signification that lays bear the fact that Italy’s colonial discourses and attitudes continue to affect even the ability of Italians to be Italian (Parati 35-36).

Rhoda’s surrender to the signifying order was preceded by an attempt to reclaim the Real and occasioned by the failure of that attempt. “According to Lacan’s formulations, the Real is that which escapes language and is experienced as affect, *jouissance*, and the death drive” (Apollon and Feldstein xiv). Rhoda’s attempted union with the Real occurs in terms of her relationship with Gianna, a middle-aged Italian woman she meets in London, and to whom Rhoda assigns the qualities of both symbolic mother and symbol for Italy. Here, the anticipated union with the mother

parallels the desired *jouissance* (fantasy) of integration. In their conversations, Rhoda becomes entranced by how Gianna speaks:

Non avevo mai parlato così con un *gaal* . . . Era uno spettacolo sentirla conversare. Apriva la bocca con grazia, non parlava per parlare come fanno molti, ma parlava per dire delle cose importanti, per fare una vera conversazione. Ogni sua parola non era sprecata, ogni sua parola aveva uno scopo.¹⁰(116)

It is Gianna's control of language that first draws Rhoda to her, and makes her fantasize that Gianna could function as a mother substitute for her: "L'avrei voluta come mamma. Mi avrebbe cullato e cantato la ninna nanna quando fossi stata inquieta" (117).¹¹ Gianna typifies Rhoda's *imago* of the successful Italian woman: she owns an upscale boutique in a trendy part of Rome that sells international teas; she is attractive, self-possessed, voluptuous, urbane. In order to see Gianna again, Rhoda abandons her family's dreams that she become "sistemata" ("settled") in London and returns to Rome. Her obsessive preoccupation with Gianna is described in terms of *jouissance*: Rhoda says Gianna quickly becomes everything to her—"Mi sentivo felice come mai prima" ("I felt happier than ever before" [123]). She wishes to "possess" Gianna; however, "la mia idea di possedere era molto diversa da quella dei signori uomini. Io volevo fondermi con lei volevo un pezzetto di lei, volevo diventare lei" (123).¹²

Rhoda insists on identifying Gianna as other, as *gaal*, and simultaneously insists on pursuing a relationship with her by attempting to emulate her, though that emulation spells the beginning of Rhoda's self-erasure. Rhoda begins to think and act like Gianna, she wears clothes Gianna gives her, and ironically, when she dresses in outfits from Gianna's boutique, her Aunt Barni compliments her on her new look being "more Somali": "Abbandonai le mie gonne jeans per tessuti in lino comodi e ampi, mi fasciasti con foulard color pastello . . . La zia Barni . . . mi disse in quei giorni 'Mi piace come ti vesti ora, sei più somala così.' Infatti i drappi etnici di Gianna erano molto Somali in un certo senso" (124).¹³ In time, Rhoda sees the relationship becoming a negation of her true self: "Comincerai anche a ragionare come lei . . . In poco tempo cancellai la mia identità . . . In realtà mi stavo annullando" (124).¹⁴

Rhoda's seemingly contradictory insistence on calling Gianna "other" yet still endeavoring to emulate her could on one level be interpreted as an attempt at de-differentiation, and could thus be understood as a regression away from the symbolic order than a bid to enter it more completely. In this model, integration into Italy represents for Rhoda an attempt to capture the Real. But if, as I argue here, the colonial power functions in terms of migrant attempts to establish identity as the symbolic order does in Lacanian psychology, then Rhoda's efforts are doomed before they begin. The symbolic order, like the postcolonial world, is always already built on difference, not on its erasure. The symbolic order has already made sure that the Real can never be reaccessed, or it is the sign of that fact.

By Rhoda's account, her demise begins when she is denied a relationship with Gianna. In a scene with blatant Lacanian overtones, in which union with the Real is attempted by recapturing the unity and completion felt in the prelinguistic phase when the infant enjoyed unity with mother, Rhoda reenacts the role of a nursing infant: "presi in bocca il suo seno sinistro e cominciai a mimare un bambino che succhia il latte materno . . . Sussurai la parola, 'mamma'" (127).¹⁵ Significantly, it is the enunciating of the word "mamma" that precipitates a violent reaction from Gianna. Rhoda's act

is not unacceptable until she voices the meaning of the act, that is, until she attempts to move the mother-child union that typifies the pre-linguistic imaginary order into the symbolic order of language where words carry value. Gianna's reaction is instant, and her rejection is total: "Mi diede una grossa spinta e urtai con il tavolino che stava lì accanto . . . gridò, 'Mi fai schifo, mi fai schifo,' . . . Mi schiaffeggiò . . . mi alzai. Andai verso di lei. Mi schiaffeggiò ancora . . . 'Non posso essere quello che vuoi tu. Non posso essere la tua mamma' . . ." (128).¹⁶

This scene is significant for several reasons. First, Rhoda's perception of Gianna as the quintessential Italian woman and as the desired, but lost, mother is telling by this very conflation of Italy with the Real. It suggests that in a postcolonial world, integration functions for the migrant as the promise of the *jouissance* lost in the transition from the Real through the mirror stage and to the symbolic order—at least to the extent that identity construction is linked with place or belonging. Second, the imagery in this scene takes on wider meaning and a confrontational irony in its allusions to the foundational myth of Rome: that of orphaned infants Romulus and Remus suckled by their adoptive mother, the she-wolf. The image of a foreigner being nursed by a powerful Roman mother reminds the national consciousness that the mythical founders of Rome were also orphans, refugees of war, foreigners, and migrants.

However, that irony does not signal hope; it only signals loss. In Rhoda's case, her attempt to insert herself into the foundational Italian mythos through her symbolic bid for integration at Gianna's breast had already been conscripted by the realities of a postcolonial Italy. Part of what Rhoda admired in Gianna, her shop of international teas, although possibly understood in a multicultural sense as openness to the foreign and non-nationalistic, must also be understood in an economic sense as part of a postcolonial economy of exchange where foreign goods mark the economic power of the retailer over the suppliers. The exotic teas for sale in Gianna's shop reduce to the differentiation and commodification of otherness—otherness that is exoticized, bought, and sold. Although the relationship is no longer colonial and mercantile, it reflects the current globalization of the postcolonial world, and points up the problem for Rhoda: as a migrant, her identity is bedeviled by the unequal power structures of a postcolonial economy. This point is only radicalized when Rhoda herself becomes a prostitute, an article of exchange, in this same economy and is preyed upon by the same inequalities of power. Thus the migrant's dream of integration is revealed to be as much a phantom of desire as is reunion with the Real, which is never recognizably real—indeed, never recognizable at all—until it is gone.

The book's epilogue ostensibly offers a form of resolution, but the suspended nature of that resolution serves to reinforce the notion that actual resolution can only be deferred. The epilogue takes the form of a letter to Aisha from her cousin, Dhammad, some time after Rhoda's death. In the novel Dhammad felt prompted to write to Aisha because he had dreamt of his mother and Rhoda meeting at the seashore.¹⁷ In his dream, he sees his mother calming and comforting Rhoda, and then the two women walk off hand in hand. He concludes his dream with the request, "ricordati, se nasce femmina, la devi chiamare Rhoda" ("remember, if the baby is a girl, you have to name her Rhoda" [207-208]). The suggestion from the dream that Rhoda is finally at peace resonates with images of reunion with the mother, the Real. The narration of the dream is juxtaposed with Dhammad's desire that if Aisha's and Pino's child is a girl, they must name her Rhoda. But while the giving of Rhoda's name to a newborn suggests a kind of hope, it is an open-ended hope, the mere deferral of a dream. The cousin's dream not only reflects desire, in this case the desire for fulfillment, but also illustrates how desire itself can be transferred, deflected, and deferred. That the dream is recounted to Aisha

acts as a form of deflection. The cousin's juxtaposition of his dream of desire-fulfillment with the hope that Aisha will name her baby Rhoda suggests that both desire and the signification of that desire can be deflected to other voices in the subjective polyphony or deferred to an as yet unrealized future.

Just as Rhoda's attempt to possess Gianna had already been made impossible by postcolonial discourses, so the hope projected by the giving of Rhoda's name to a new generation is already scotched by the inheritance which that act suggests. Postcolonial problems are passed down through acts of signification such as these. Little hope can be mustered for a child given the name of one who had become nothing but a name, a signifier that points only to lack and desire. However, Rhoda's name is also the name of the novel. While in the system of signification in the novel, Rhoda's name signifies lack, in the larger discourse of migration literature, the title of the novel signifies an awareness. Bringing the unconscious (and its problems) to consciousness is the beginning of healing for the psychologist's patient. Scego's novel, in exposing postcolonial effects on identity construction as having Lacanian dynamics becomes one of the polyphonic voices of the migrant experience and part of the logotherapy necessary to heal its process of integration.

NOTES

¹ “Nura Hussein was too far ahead of her. [Faduma] watched her the way people watched certain rare species. ‘That’s what an integrated person is like,’ she thought. Yes, for Faduma integrated people were like Nura” (107). All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² “Aisha tried to understand those people. She argued with them, fought with them, but always found some point of contact. We were different. We weren’t integrated like her” (119).

³ “For [Aunt Barni] I was tradition that prospered, the ways and customs that would never disappear. For her, I was the Somalia that was lost . . . She always told me, ‘Rhoda, you are just like me’” (118–119).

⁴ “Even in our hatred for whites we were similar, we didn’t understand them and we didn’t want to understand them” (118).

⁵ The sign emanated light like a star lost in the firmament . . . it was formed by five letters. / A name. / An anguish. / Five letters that contained more destinies. Including her own. / Barni did not believe she was really the owner of a store. / To no longer be a servant. / To finally be integrated. / The sign showed it. The “ethnic” store Rhoda was a reality and that sign in pastel colors was the clear proof. (185)

⁶ I was oppressed by clichés. No one allowed me . . . to be Rhoda Ismail, simply Rhoda Ismail, a girl like many others, not special, not unique, not extraordinary. Everyone wanted me to be in the image and likeness of something that I simply could not be . . .

According to the situation, I was the model student, the perfect sister, the faithful friend, the irreproachable niece, the devoted slave. (162)

⁷ “Il luogo comune poi si ingigantiva se allargavo l’ambito a quello che erano le mie origini. Una donna nera in Italia aveva, nell’immaginario comune, delle collocazioni precise. Si andava dal top ai bassifondi più tetri. Le donne nere erano cantanti di soul o di jazz . . . o donne perdute, femmine avidi di soldi a vendersi per pochi luridi spiccioli. In quanto donna nera mi sentivo etichettata. Non avevo scampo . . . Fu così che decisi di arrendermi al luogo comune.” (162)

“Clichés enlarged and expanded in the area of my origins. A black woman in Italy had, in the common understanding, precise categorizations. These went from the top to the most dismal lows. Black women were singers of jazz or soul . . . or lost women, woman eager to sell themselves for a little lurid money. As a black woman, I felt labeled. I was without escape . . . So I decided to surrender to the stereotype.” (162)

⁸ “My situation reminded me greatly of the situation of Gaetano in *I’m Starting from Three* . . . The protagonist of the film, like me, was fleeing from stereotypes. He had gone to Florence for a while, for a change of scene, to take a trip . . . But people didn’t believe that someone from Naples could take a trip just to take one. It was impossible. Unthinkable. An atrocious blasphemy. A Neapolitan should emigrate, thus it was written, and thus it must be . . . Gaetano could be few things: a Mafioso, a singer of schmaltzy songs . . . he was condemned just as I was condemned.” (162)

⁹ See also Sandro Mezzadra, *La condizione postcoloniale* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2008) for an articulate theorization of “colonial” and “postcolonial” not only in terms of geography and race, but fundamentally in terms of hegemonic structures of power, and how those systems apply not only to Italy’s African colonies under fascism, but the position of southern Italian migrants to the North as well as the current status of foreign migrants into Italy.

¹⁰“I’d never talked like this with a *gaal* . . . It was like watching a performance to listen to her converse. She opened her mouth gracefully, she never talked just to talk like so many others do, but she talked to say important things, to have a real conversation. Not one of her words was wasted, every single word had a purpose” (116).

¹¹“I would have liked her to be my mother. She would have cradled me and sung lullabies to me when I was troubled” (117).

¹² “My idea of possessing was very different from the idea of their lordships. I wanted melt into her, I wanted a little piece of her, I wanted to become her” (123).

¹³“I abandoned my jeans skirts for roomy, comfortable garments in linen fabrics, I wound myself in pastel-colored foulards . . . Aunt Barni told me in those days, ‘I like how you’re dressing now, you’re more Somali like this.’ In fact, Gianni’s ethnic drapes were very Somali in a certain sense” (124).

¹⁴“I even began to reason like her . . . In no time I erased my own identity . . . In reality I was deleting myself” (124).

¹⁵“I took her left breast in my mouth and began to imitate a baby who sucks its mother’s milk . . . I whispered the word, ‘Mama’” (127).

¹⁶“She gave me a shove and I crashed against the table that stood beside . . . she screamed, ‘You make me sick, you make me sick’ . . . she slapped me . . . I stood up. I went toward her. She slapped me again . . . ‘I can’t be what you want. I can’t be your mother’ . . .” (128).

¹⁷“C’era una enorme spiaggia . . . Nel sogno Rhoda cammina scalza e sento la sua anima . . . È come se Rhoda non volesse abbandonare se stessa, il mondo e i suoi ricordi . . . Il mio sogno consiste proprio nei suoi pensieri. E quelli sono verticosi, pieni, confusi. Non vuole andarsene, capisci? È terribile questo, sai? I morti devono andarsene per stare davvero in pace . . . Ma poi . . . viene una donna verso di lei . . . È mia madre . . . Nel sogno fa una cosa tipica da genitore, si avvicina a Rhoda e le mette una mano sulla spalla. Non fa altro. Stanno così per tanto, tantissimo tempo. Poi . . . le due, mano nella mano, si allontanano fino a svanire nel nulla.” (207–208)

“There was an enormous beach . . . In the dream Rhoda walked barefoot and I felt her presence . . . It was as if Rhoda did not want to abandon herself, her world, and her memories . . . My dream consisted of her thoughts. And those were vertiginous, full, confused. She didn’t want to go on, do you understand? It’s terrible, you know? The dead must go on to truly be at peace . . . But then . . . a woman came toward her . . . It is my mother . . . In the dream, she does a thing typical of a parent, she comes near Rhoda and puts a hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t do anything else. They stay like that for a long, very long time. Then . . . the two of them walk off hand in hand and get farther away until they vanish into nothing.” (207–208)

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