

Matria in Contemporary Somali Literature in Italian: Mapping Articulations of Female Solidarity and Resistance

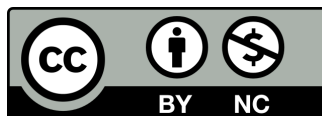
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Abstract

This article discusses *Matria* as a concept for mapping and interpreting the forms of solidarity between women in texts by contemporary postcolonial Somali writers in Italian. The article analyses the recurrent presence of pairs of female characters, whose reciprocal support creates a gendered and intersectional long-lasting form of solidarity, and the dynamic intersection of female gender with various forms of political, national, cultural, social identity in Kaha Mohamed Aden's anthology *Fra-intendimenti*, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's novels *Madre piccola* and *Il comandante del fiume*, and Igiaba Scego's novels *Rhoda* and *Oltre Babilonia*. In these texts, empowering sisterhood is played out through the exclusion of the male concept of homeland/fatherland, allowing new forms of resistance. I elaborate and distance myself from previous uses of *Matria* and redefine it as the umbrella term under which this dynamic relational network and its imagery can be understood.

Keywords: Cultural studies, female agency, gender studies, patriarchal violence, postcolonial Somali literature

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About the author

I am a feminist who is a white migrant woman, a naturalised Australian, a polyglot non-native English-speaker, and an internationally recognised expert in Somali literature. As relevant to these multiple categories, I constantly and carefully consider how to position myself as a scholar focused on postcolonial discourse and gender studies, with decolonial and feminist approaches. All my work examines the multiple ways in which literature can positively influence socio-personal and historical discourses concerning immigration, gender, identity, and colonialism. I have also published studies of activist literature to challenge historical denial, fixed national identities, and complacency about violence against women. I am deeply interested in literature and the performing arts as active means of fostering social inclusion and equality. In all, as part of my lived day-to-day experience, and in my professional life—as a key commitment in my academic research—I have long made a study of intersectionality, particularly with reference to feminist and transcultural approaches.

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*Ci laviamo con le altre donne
I miei figli sono i loro figli
Voglio tenere insieme tutti i pezzi
Indossare l'abito con le altre
Senza di loro, vecchie e adolescenti,
storpie e bellissime, bianche e nere,
io non esisto
Sono donna finché loro esistono*

We wash ourselves with the other women
My children are their children
I want to keep all the pieces together
Wearing the dress with the others
Without them, old and teenagers,
Crippled and gorgeous, white and black,
I do not exist
I am a woman as far as they exist

From the poem “Strappo” by Ubah
Cristina Ali Farah (2020b)¹

Introduction

Contemporary writers of postcolonial Somali literature in Italian² live and work dispersed within the global Somali diaspora that followed the outbreak of the Somali Civil War in 1991. Nevertheless, they share a common imaginary that emerges in their writing. In her poem “Strappo/Tear” (2020b), quoted above,

¹ All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

² Many postcolonial scholars within Italian Studies use the expression *letteratura postcoloniale italiana*, which I consider misleading because it suggests that Italy is the colonized country. Moreover, I reject it as a further form of (neo)colonial exploitation. Of course, my aim is not to challenge the cultural and national identity of these authors. Considering the Italian tendency to deny any involvement in the Scramble for Africa, I believe it is paramount not to pass off the cultural products of artists from the former colonies as Italian *tout court*, without a collective deep and honest reflection on the Italian colonial responsibilities. Even a literary label can contribute to the decolonizing process, which starts with the acceptance of our own accountabilities. For an extensive explanation, see Lori (2013, 12).

Ubah Cristina Ali Farah evokes the sisterhood she identifies among women with whom she shares a Somali heritage; this female bond is significant to the point of making her own existence inextricable from that of *le altre donne*, ‘the other women’. The sisterhood depicted in this poem is an entry point to a complexity that is increasingly prominent in contemporary postcolonial Somali literature in Italian, where we often find pairs of women whose reciprocal support creates a gendered and intersectional long-lasting form of solidarity. By intersectionality (see Crenshaw 1991), I refer to “a perspective, framework or research paradigm to deal with the complex interaction of different social categories such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, or age, among others” (Rodó-Zárate and Jorba 2020, 24). This paradigm helps me to clarify that we are not dealing with a monolithic form of universal mateship, as it implies a gendered solidarity “shaped by multiple social vectors and overlapping identity categories (...) that may not be readily visible in single-axis formulations of identity” (Ruíz 2017, 335). In this article, I explore the use of the term *Matria* as a conceptual label for these intersections. I map out past uses of this term and extend the meaning of *Matria* to encompass the intersection of gender, diasporic status, and individual backgrounds of the characters.³

With her 2005 short story “Dismatria”, Igiaba Scego is the writer who has given *matria* a certain visibility (Kuruvilla et al. 2005). As indicated by Manuela Coppola (2011), Scego used it as a way to play with the contrast between *patria* – ‘homeland’ in Italian,

³ The term *Matria* highlights the strong parallel between families and nations, as captured by Anne McClintock (1993, 63): “A paradox lies at the heart of most national narratives. Nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. The term ‘nation’ derives from ‘natio’: to be born. We speak of nations as ‘motherlands’ and ‘fatherlands’. Foreigners ‘adopt’ countries that are not their native homes, and are ‘naturalized’ into the national family. We talk of the Family of Nations, of ‘homelands’ and ‘native’ lands.”

but literally ‘fatherland’ – and *matria*, which emphasizes the maternal love between her and her country:

Our name for our living nightmare was *dismatria*.⁴ (...) We’re exmatriates, (...) someone had severed – perhaps forever – the umbilical cord attaching us to our *matria*, our mother country of Somalia. And orphans, what do they normally do? Dream. And that’s what we did. (...) In our heart, though, we bore the torment of the exiled. In our heart of hearts we knew that we would never again go back to Somalia, to our Somalia, because the fact was our Somalia no longer existed. (Scego 2011, 231)

Furthermore, Scego’s narrator rejects the idea of visiting the present-day Somalia, “that assemblage of *warlords*, corruption, and hunger”, as it will be nothing like the lost country they once had (Scego 2011, 232). It is not known whether Scego has in mind the more widespread use of the term in hispanophone countries, both in high and popular culture.⁵ However, *matria* has its rare occurrences, preceding Scego’s definition, within Italian literary criticism as well. The philosopher Massimo Cacciari uses the term to pledge his devotion and define his belonging not to *patria* – with its political, historical, geographical implications – but rather to his language, *madrelingua*, *matria* (Palieri 2011). In this sense, the term stresses a distinction from the shared and ideologically charged *patria*. There are other examples of this: Gianfranco Contini (1978, 6) adopts it to analyse Andrea Zanzotto’s relationship with his specific localized landscape: “Everyone knows that Zanzotto does not go far from his small either fatherland or

motherland”.⁶ In the same vein, Mario Rigoni Stern (1984) frequently used *matria* to emphasize the difference between Italy as a *patria* and the *altopiano* [tableland] where he was born. *Matria*, in this sense, works as a strategy of distinction, of specification that does not discard or reject but rather widens the idea of national identity. It does not aim at substitution, but works dialectically, within a complex field of tensions. I consider this nuance crucial, even if it is absent from the recent debate initiated by Scego. The writer Michela Murgia echoed Scego in November 2017 in her article titled “Il concetto di patria ha fatto solo danni. Cominciamo a parlare di Matria” [“The concept of the fatherland only caused troubles. Let’s start talking about Motherland”]. At this point, a heated discourse developed around the concept, and a month after Murgia’s article was published, Scego added further to the debate – again playing on the nexus of nation/family – by suggesting that “Né Patria né Matria: la nazione del futuro deve essere ‘Fratria’” [“Nor Fatherland nor Motherland: the nation of the future must be ‘Brotherland’”] (2017).⁷ Needless to say, both contributions received strong criticism from the right wing media in Italy, which clearly perceived the threat of this agenda of substitution (Fiore 2017). In fact, in the uses illustrated above, *Matria* either conveys a contrasting duality between different forms of belonging, old and new loyalties (Scego, Cacciari), or it indicates some sort of Matryoshka-like identity, where one expression is contained within the wider one (Zanzotto, Rigoni-Stern). My use of the term *Matria* is equally distant from both sets of definitions and yet can be seen as a way of intertwining them: I suggest adopting *Matria* as a dynamic concept that includes rather than substitutes new gendered, intersectional forms of belonging.

⁴ *Dismatria* is a made-up word signifying people who have been displaced from their motherland.

⁵ See González (2018); the song *Matria* by Cheryl Rivera (2018) featuring García López; or the short film with the same title by the Galician director Álvaro Gago Díaz (2017).

⁶ It was also used by Sergio Salvi (1978) in his book on minority languages.

⁷ *Fratria* is an invented word that can be translated as ‘Brotherland’.

This article aims at documenting and interpreting the *Matria*-sphere as a contribution to the body of secondary literature on postcolonial works in Italian.⁸ At present, it is showing two main tendencies. On the one hand, postcolonial authors are studied in parallel and often in dialogue with so-called second-generation artists from various backgrounds; postcolonial novelists and playwrights are often analysed side by side with artists from different disciplines such as music and street and visual arts (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012; Ponzanesi and Habed 2018). Alongside this mapping, there is an ongoing attempt to interpret specific works through the lens of urban geography (Gerrand 2016; Ponzanesi and Colpani 2015), the relationship between the first and second languages of bilingual writers (Negro 2015; Romeo 2018), and intergenerational trauma (Brioni and Bonsa Gulema 2018), to name only a few examples. This article intends to define *Matria* as a critical concept for guiding an intersectional and gendered literary analysis. The article analyses the phenomenon of *Matria* in a set of novels and short stories. I discuss how *Matria* is articulated beyond simple female solidarity, as it carries the intersection of female gender with various forms of identity – political, national, cultural, and social. At the same time, it excludes other kinds of belonging, such as the male concept of homeland, allowing the remodelling of new forms and modes of resistance. At a time when this literature is gaining a global readership – as attested by the number of translations being published⁹ – and therefore greater critical attention, a close discussion of the *Matria*-sphere highlights the ways in which Somali postcolonial writers

contribute to growing awareness of the diversity of Italian literature and to affirming the legacy of Italy's colonial past. Furthermore, they provide an important cultural contribution to the processes of decolonization. Being predominantly women writers offering a non-Western perspective on colonization and decolonization processes, they challenge the dominant assumption that the hegemonic Eurocentric paradigm is an objective point of view (Grosfoguel 2006, 167). Therefore, by contributing through their writing to the provision of subaltern perspectives, Somali postcolonial writers are defying “the entanglement of multiple and heterogenous hierarchies (...) of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic, and racial forms of domination and exploitation” that characterize all global power structures (Grosfoguel 2006, 172). At the same time, they bring to light “the kaleidoscopic narrative encompassing broad swathes of time and territory and [valorizing] the unstoppable struggles that challenge the legacies of colonial slavery and racism” that Françoise Vergès (2021, 16) indicates as the role of decolonial feminism.

The works discussed here include Kaha Mohamed Aden's short stories in the anthology *Fra-intendimenti* ('Mis-understandings') (2010), the novels *Madre piccola* (2007) (*Little Mother*, 2011) and *Il comandante del fiume* ('The River's Master') (2014) by Ali Farah, and *Rhoda* (2004) and *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) (*Beyond Babylon*, 2019) by Scego. These texts show female characters carrying the burden of the failed Somali *Patria*, and the responsibility for creating an alternative space within the Somali diaspora that is safe from violence. The female characters do not find their agency by themselves, but through reciprocal friendships that work as means of resisting violence and racist biases. Facilitating an experience whereby women regain agency together, the *Matria*-sphere has the capacity to foster individual and collective healing – but not only for the women. While most often portrayed in domestic situations within the Somali diaspora,

⁸ To name a few published either in Italian or English: Derobertis (2010); Lori (2013); Brioni (2015); and Comberiat and Luffin (2018).

⁹ For example, in English: Ali Farah, *Little Mother* (2011); Scego, *Adua* (2017) and *Beyond Babylon* (2019); in Portuguese: Scego, *Adua* (2018) and *Minha Casa E Onde Estou* (2018); and in French: Ali Farah, *Un Sambouk traverse la mer* (2020).

the female characters in these texts symbolize resistance on a larger scale that they withstand through their performative relationships with one another. The protagonists emphasize the intergenerational bonds and female friendships formed outside the immediate family in order to resist patriarchal violence, the related historical violence of *Patria*, and racial violence. This understanding recognizes that “all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender” (McClintock 1993, 61). Clearly a correlate of the term *Patria*, the capitalized, female-gendered term *Matria* used in this article implicitly draws attention to the structural interdependence of nation-states, nationalism, and patriarchy. In doing so, *Matria* is simultaneously a more fluid concept that only ever partially intersects with dominant notions of ‘homeland’ and national identity.

Intersections of resistance to a failed *Patria*: generation, gender, nation, and clan

Such a vivid intersection between the imagery of nation and of family is specifically relevant with reference to Somali society, in which all private and public relationships – from marrying to forming a parliament – are determined by clan belonging and loyalty based on patrilineal descent. Before embarking on the close reading, it is crucial to clarify that with the term *Patria* I refer to Somalia as a national state, under which umbrella, the narratives and politics of clan belonging were articulated throughout various stages of history.¹⁰ Clan-based violence targeted civilians for political reasons long before colonial times, when it became the basis of imperial policies. As elaborated by Kapteijns (2014, 2):

during the decolonisation process, the young politicians of the era of the civilian administration (1960–1969) who had inherited a deeply tribalized state from their colonial masters (...) used political patronage and feelings of clan solidarity among their constituencies as a political instrument against each other.

Kapteijns (2014, 2) highlights how political violence, though significant, was not yet pervasive in this period, and that the “use of large-scale violence against civilians on the basis of clan did not become common political practice until the [advent of Siad Barre’s] military regime (1969–1991)”. In this sense, the work of Somali postcolonial writers outlines a new sphere. This sphere cannot be neatly conflated with the physical space and places of a nation, nor with a common lineage, whereby a character might effectively resist violence because of a presumed, unavoidable belonging based on clan solidarity. In fact, in colonial and postcolonial Somalia, the *Patria* – dominated by fixed, patrilineal, blood-based forms of belonging – and the 1991 Civil War both had their roots in clan divisions. Only in the last decade has the fraught topic of such divisions been raised within a cultural and literary context.

Mohamed Aden is especially open about clanic violence and its consequences, and often includes these themes in her narratives. She suggests that patrilineal descent – upon which the failed Somali *Patria* and patriarchy are based – should be substituted by a matrilineal genealogy to overcome the effects of patriarchal violence. She implicitly rejects Scego’s idea of *Matria* as a lost haven. Partly autobiographical, and written in the first person, “Autoritratto/Self-Portrait”, the second story in Mohamed Aden’s anthology *Fra-intendimenti*, celebrates the narrator’s female genealogies as a valuable alternative to the fixed, patrilineal principles imposed by the Somali clan system. In a recent interview, Mohamed Aden ironically stated that, since

¹⁰ The clan system, its implications for Somali people, and its role in the Civil War that followed the deposition of Siad Barre have been comprehensively explained by Kapteijns (2014).

Somali people have the habit of tallying ancestors, it might be enough to change the ancestor from whom to start such a tally – that is, to begin counting from a female forebear:

The female genealogy was a suggestion for me. (...) Patrilineal descent is vertical; it comes to you from above. Instead, I placed the grandmothers horizontally, like clouds that guide us. If the image of the vertical genealogy ends with the roots in the soil, on the ground, tied, that of the cloud-grandmothers, on the other hand, is a genealogy that carries us around. (Lori 2020, 6)

In “Autoritratto” the female narrator introduces her three grandmothers: Suuban, “the correct”, Xaliima, “the generous general”, and Xaawa, portentous, regal, and aggressive, who was chosen to conduct the infant Kaha out of her private shell, and thus present the baby girl to and in the world (Mohamed Aden 2010, 9). The grandmothers’ influence on the life of the narrator is formative, as they remained stable guides and role models throughout her life. The presence of these women and their teachings help the narrator avoid taking sides in the clan conflict. Refusing the traditional social requirement to identify with her patrilineal genealogy, she chooses her grandmothers instead. In so doing, she invokes the unity and harmony of a family of women. She also reiterates that the law of men has tried to separate what was once united:

Attualmente, al tavolo delle trattative per la pacificazione dei clan, le due famiglie da cui discendono le mie nonne non sono riuscite nemmeno a sedere insieme. Sono tentata di considerare le mie nonne fortunate per non aver assistito all’abbruttimento e al degrado che vivono le loro “Vamiglie”. (Mohamed Aden 2010, 10)

Currently, at the negotiating table for the reconciliation of the clans, the two

families from which my grandmothers descend have not even been able to sit together. I am tempted to consider my grandmothers lucky for not having witnessed the ugliness and decay that their “families” are experiencing.

Thus, in what may first appear to be an intimate story of a childhood experience, the internal narrator takes a very clear position regarding the historical and gendered processes of clan-based conflict in Somali society. Through the narrator, Mohamed Aden addresses the subject of clan divisions and violence by affirming the empowering, intergenerational bonds among women within the private realm of the home.

“Autoritratto” illustrates one dimension of the possible articulation of *Matria*. Highlighting the intersection of nation, clan, gender, colonialism, and intergenerationality, it further shows how the imagery and concept of *Matria* is not limited to stories set in the Somali diaspora. Here, the *Matria*-sphere is evoked as a realm of female solidarity that pre-dates the end of the Somali Civil War yet becomes a tool to resist violence within the Somali diaspora. At the beginning of “Autoritratto”, Mohamed Aden emphasizes her parents’ choice to entrust her presentation to the world to a resilient and combative woman. Likewise, in the final part of the story she underlines her own name as an expression of hope and unification; a symbol of a society characterized by the freedom and openness associated with Somalia’s political independence from Italy – itself a form of resistance:

Sono nata in una famiglia dedita per generazioni allo studio del Corano, ma il mio nome non si trova fra le pagine del Corano. Il mio nome è un omaggio a tanta libertà cercata per l’indipendenza dell’Africa, agli anni sessanta, quando sono nata. Kaha: “la luce del sole”. (Mohamed Aden 2010, 10)

I was born into a family dedicated for generations to the study of the Koran, but

my name cannot be found in the pages of the Koran. My name is a tribute to the freedom craved throughout the struggles for Africa's independence, in the sixties, when I was born. Kaha: "the light of the sun".

The failed *Patria* of post-independence Somalia, lacerated by the effects of the Civil War, is the utmost symbol of patriarchal violence in postcolonial Somali literature in Italian. In this literature, the failed *Patria* still suffers from the long repercussions of Italy's imperial aggression, as well as from the dictatorship of Siad Barre. Hence writers such as Mohamed Aden often evoke the layered violence of patriarchal colonialism, even though these layers are hard to disentangle. The *Matria*-sphere and the *Patria* constitute an indissoluble dyad in which the former resists the latter. Dynamic and performative, the *Matria*-sphere of female friendships is presented as empowering and capable of resisting violence instead of perpetrating it.¹¹

Beyond female solidarity

In postcolonial Somali literature in Italian, the concept of *Matria* is structured by the imagery of an elective community, created by female relationships capable of opposing inherited patriarchal violence. However, it is not only women who benefit from this empowering sisterhood, as we can see in *Il comandante del fiume* by Ali Farah. The protagonist, Yabar, is a young Somali-born man, and the only child of parents from rival clans. The story follows his slow appreciation of the truth that the father

he had idealized is a violent, dangerous man. After a painful search for his father, Yabar embraces the family of women that his mother has established in Rome to shield and separate him from the clan-based violence that had scarred their nuclear family. In this example, *Matria* is intergenerational and intergendered, as Yabar chooses the functional and loving female network created by his mother instead of further searching for a male connection with his absent father.

Anna-Leena Toivanen (2013, 102) has observed that "father-daughter relations [are] a vehicle for dealing with the failures of the postcolonial nation-state [and] the father-daughter narratives are closely intertwined with the postcolonial nation". It is similarly insightful to read *Il comandante del fiume* through the related lens of the mother-son relationship to understand how the Somali clan system and its rules are symbolically portrayed in the problematic relationship between a young Somali man raised in Italy and his father, and mediated by the mother-son relationship which is able to flourish in the diaspora. With her characteristic non-chronological narrative, Ali Farah tells the story of young Yabar; his Somali mother Zahra; his mother's Somali-Italian friend Rosa, and Rosa's daughter Sissi. This is the elective family that Zahra has created in Rome after separating from her husband, who has committed an unforgivable crime (Ali Farah 2014, 180).

Many postcolonial Somali literary works in Italian include fathers as absent figures, or as negligent, inept individuals (see Ali Farah 2007; Scego 2008, 2015). *Il comandante del fiume* is no exception here: the father figure is depicted in thoroughly negative terms. Meanwhile, unsurprisingly, Yabar's mother Zahra is shown to have a complicated relationship with her son. Although she plays a fundamental role in the novel, she features in the text almost exclusively in her son's memories. One day, during a meeting organized by Yabar's school, Zahra meets Rosa, a woman with a Somali mother and an Italian father. From the

¹¹ Similar examples of this intersection can be found throughout Aden's anthology, for example in "La casa con l'albero: tra il Giusto e il Bene". This short story compellingly shows the extent of the physical violence that marked the Somali *Patria* at the outbreak of the 1991 civil and clan war, and the author's criticism of the male-dominated social and political system that characterized the latter part of the dictatorship in Somalia (Mohamed Aden 2010, 29).

very beginning, the narrative conveys Rosa's inner conflict: the separation from her mother caused by the father who raised her. He actively kept her apart from her mother, and always repressed Rosa's need to get in touch with her Somali roots: "Tutto ciò che la riguardava è sempre stato un tabù. Un vuoto e un mito allo stesso tempo" ["Everything about her has always been a taboo. A void and a myth at the same time"] (Ali Farah 2014, 83). As a result, Rosa is trapped in her own dualism between the world that her father built around her in Italy, and the Somali identity from which she was torn without the possibility of return. After meeting Zahra, Rosa starts to reconnect the threads of her own story. The relationship with her new Somali friend resolves her inner conflict and reacquaints her with that part of herself that her father had denied her. The narrator explains Rosa's insights through the words of Yabar:

È come se mamma l'avesse aiutata a ritrovare una parte di sé, sepolta da tanto tempo.

Le ha insegnato a cucinare il riso alla somala, i nomi degli ingredienti, il significato delle canzoni, tutte cose che zia Rosa pensava di non sapere e invece, grazie a mamma, piano piano sono venute fuori. Stavano solo nascoste in qualche angolo, dentro di lei. (Ali Farah 2014, 64)

It is as if Mum had helped her to rediscover a part of herself that had been buried for a long time. She taught her how to cook Somali rice, the names of the ingredients, the meaning of the songs, all things that Aunt Rosa thought she didn't know and instead, thanks to Mum, they slowly came out. They were just hiding somewhere inside her.

Rosa chooses to find, in Zahra's knowledge, the means to help her heal the inner conflict caused by her father's violence in repressing her Somali heritage. She herself admits it

when she says: "E poi siete arrivati voi. Tua madre mi ha insegnato a non vergognarmi di me stessa e della mia storia" ["And then you two came along. Your mother taught me not to be ashamed of myself and my story"] (Ali Farah 2014, 120). The effects of the family violence she suffered because of her father are mitigated by her friendship with Zahra. This friendship, with its fresh and future-oriented perspective, allows both women to establish an elective female family in Italy for their children and for themselves. Rosa is depicted regularly helping Zahra in her relationship with her son, moderating it and, when necessary, stepping in to explain to Yabar his mother's good intentions. Also thanks to Rosa, Yabar eventually realizes that he already has a family, and so his potentially destructive quest to find his father can stop:

Quando stavo a Londra, ho capito che non me ne importava proprio un bel niente di scoprire dov'era mio padre. In fondo non so neppure chi sia. Siete voi la mia famiglia Sissi, tu, mamma, zia Rosa, e Roma è la nostra. (Ali Farah 2014, 204)

When I was in London, I realized that I didn't give a damn about finding out where my father was. After all, I don't even know who he is. You are my family Sissi: you, Mum, Aunt Rosa; and Rome is our city.

Il comandante del fiume is a coming-of-age novel in which the young protagonist needs to come to terms with his father and the violence – patriarchal, inherited, and emotional – he represents. However, the novel also revolves around the relationship between Rosa and Zahra and their mutual empowerment against these intersecting forms of violence. The novel celebrates the alternative family that these women co-create for Yabar and Sissi. The father symbolizes the past, the failed Somali *Patria* that Yabar now rejects. His mother, her new value system that is free of clan identification, and the *Matria*-sphere that

comes into being through her sisterhood with Rosa, represent the hope for a new life that Yabar embraces. The Somali tradition requires children to be their mother's responsibility through the first decade of their lives, after which they become the fathers' responsibility. In the new dimension of the *Matria*-sphere, Ali Farah's mothers distance and protect their children from fathers, clan belonging, loyalty, and vendettas – and thus from the obligation to identify with their patrilineal genealogy. In this way, the women enable a decolonized future for themselves, their children, and their communities.

Resistance against Italian racism

Whether explicitly or implicitly contrasted with the violence connected with the failed Somali *Patria*, the *Matria*-sphere represents a form of resistance to violence and it grants women in the Somali diaspora a chance to thrive. Scego's first novel, *Rhoda*, offers a valuable depiction of the *Matria*-sphere as a form of resistance to racism experienced by women in the Somali diaspora. The long-time friends Barni and Faduma are Somali exiles in Italy. Throughout the novel, these women face the pain of displacement in their host country, as well as racist discrimination, here conveyed in the assumption that they do not speak Italian:

A furia di sentirsi dire: “Voi negri non sapete l'italiano!” Barni aveva finito per crederci. (...) E finì col diventare quello stereotipo di donna immigrata che la società (o meglio i media) voleva vedere in lei. (Scego 2004, 155)

By dint of being told: “You niggers can't speak Italian!” Barni ended up believing it. (...) And she ended up becoming the stereotypical immigrant woman that

society (or rather the media) wanted to see in her.

As the story unfolds, Barni and Faduma are portrayed as defeated women living in a city they dislike, and from which they constantly feel rejected. However, eventually these women open a shop in Rome that sells items from different cultures, described as an ‘ethnic’ shop [“un negozio ‘etnico’”]: a strong example of their solidarity and shared agency (Scego 2004, 158). By opening the shop, Barni and Faduma create a transcultural and transnational space they can safely inhabit while resisting the locals' pressures to ‘assimilate’ to Italian culture. The shop is a tangible manifestation of the ways they survive together and how they thrive through the solidarity of *Matria* in a racist and partially hostile environment.

There are also examples that go beyond exclusively Somali identities and affinities. Mohamed Aden's short story “Un tè serio bollente” [“A Serious Boiling Tea”] is set in a contemporary Italian city and tells a tale of prejudice countermanded by female solidarity. The unnamed Somali protagonist-narrator feels like drinking traditional Somali tea, made with a variety of spices, including cardamom. On her way to buy the spices, she encounters her friends, whom she introduces to the reader as sisters, *sorelle*: “Chi si vede! Le mie carissime sorelle Elena e Daniela; da un po'di anni ci siamo adottate” [“Who's here! My beloved sisters Elena and Daniela. It's been years since we adopted each other”] (Mohamed Aden 2010, 89). From their names, Eli and Dani, the reader can assume that the women are Italian. They decide to accompany their Somali friend. Planning to enjoy the spiced tea together, they visit the herbs stall at the market. At the stall, the protagonist asks for cardamom, *cardamomo* in Italian. But the seller hears the request as one for “carne d'uomo”, human meat:

Io: Ha del cardamomo? La signora: Carne d'uomo!? Signorina queste cose non si dicono e non troverà mai carne del genere dalle nostre parti. (...) In un baleno mi sono resa conto di quello che vedeva la signora: tutti erano bianchi tranne me. (Mohamed Aden 2010, 93)

Me: Do you have any cardamom? The lady: Human meat!? Miss, we don't say these things and you will never find anything like that around here. (...) In a flash I realized what the lady was seeing: everyone was white except me.

At first the protagonist is disoriented. She had not anticipated and cannot grasp the misunderstanding, yet she quickly realizes what it is going on. The woman at the stall is so focused on her foreign appearance and skin colour that, instead of listening, she assumes the person she considers a savage is asking for human meat instead of a common spice. The protagonist's Italian friends are speechless. "A Eli e Dani sembrava che avessero versato addosso il tè bollente" ["It looked like Eli and Dani had had boiling tea poured straight onto them"] (Mohamed Aden 2010, 93). Representing the protagonist's 'adopted' family, however, they quickly rally, and unequivocally support her act of reclaiming agency:

Ho cercato di incontrare i loro occhi e ho detto ridendo ad alta voce: "Be'! Che c'è di strano, ha solo detto che sono nera, oppure negra!" Eli e Dani hanno riso insieme a me e insieme abbiamo lasciato il mercato. Quel giorno, con le mie sorelle, ho preso un tè poco serio al bar. (Mohamed Aden 2010, 93)

I tried to make eye contact with them and then, laughing out loud, I said "Well! What's strange about it, she just said I'm black, or a nigger!" Eli and Dani laughed with me and together we left the market.

That day, with my sisters, I had a not-very-serious tea at the bar.

The story ends with the protagonist renouncing her idea of making traditional Somali tea, which connects her with her past and her grandmother. She shares a *poco serio* – less serious, perhaps more fun – tea at a café with her 'adopted' sisters. The symbolism is clear and evidences the idea of the *Matria*-sphere as a form of female solidarity embodied in mutually empowering friendship. With the support of their presence and expressive connection – "Ho cercato di incontrare i loro occhi" ["I tried to make eye contact with them"] – the subject of casual racism is not intimidated but asserts her agency through the surprising response of laughter. The author portrays the friendship between the protagonist, Eli, and Dani as necessary to withstanding the seller's arrogance and racist condescension. The fact that the seller is also a woman emphasizes the difference between female solidarity, or lack thereof, and the elective form of sisterhood that characterizes the *Matria*-sphere. On the other hand, it seems fair to assume that the protagonist's two Italian friends are white. Therefore, the episode illustrates that there is not a stereotypical enemy that the women need to protect themselves from through the gendered relationships formed within the *Matria*.

***Matria* beyond Somalia**

In *Oltre Babilonia*, Scego portrays another pair of women recreating new forms of belonging while dealing with their trauma in the diaspora. Political resistance, partially failed when conducted individually, succeeds when the two Argentinian characters, Miranda and Rosa, join forces to write Rosa's memoir. Their story is an example of how the *Matria* is not limited to autobiographical stories nor to the Somali diaspora, but *au contraire* is open to the world and its various resisting spaces. The novel has five narrators: two adult women, the man they both loved, and their respective daughters. The

two daughters meet by chance in a school of Arabic in Tunisia and become friends without knowing that they are half-sisters. One of the two mothers is Miranda, a white Argentinian poet of Italian and Portuguese origins, who relocated to Rome after the military coup in Argentina. Rosa Benatti, called *la Flaca* – the Skinny – because of her slim body, was the girlfriend of Miranda’s brother, Ernesto. The couple were kidnapped and tortured by the militaries and only Rosa managed to survive. Miranda, who adored her future sister-in-law in Argentina, meets her again, completely by chance, in Rome in the seventies. She recognizes Rosa’s psychological distress and starts to take care of her. Miranda herself, however, suffers from an internal conflict: when she was in Buenos Aires, she was involved with Carlos, one of the military personnel torturing prisoners in the Esma, the former technical school where political captives, including Ernesto and Rosa, were kept. On the one hand, there is *la Flaca*, who, regardless of her physical and moral scars, has survived the torture and in a sense defeated a system that wanted to erase her. On the other, there is Miranda, who was complicit in that system, even if indirectly.

When the two meet again in Rome, Miranda tries her best to help Rosa, out of generosity but also in a selfish attempt to free herself from her past mistakes. Miranda fails in her attempts to assist Rosa, who commits suicide by swallowing disinfectant. It is as if the persecutors had succeeded in silencing her:

Quante lingue parlava la Flaca? Alla fine non lo sapeva nemmeno più, povera amica mia. Borbottava. La tragedia le aveva fatto perdere definitivamente la capacità di articolare discorsi sensati. Nei momenti calmi scriveva i suoi taccuini. (...) Le avevano rubato i suoni quei bastardi. (...) *Con cara fea le han cortado su alma, su voz. No tiene voz, mí Flaca.* Con una faccia cattiva le hanno strappato

l’anima, la voce. Non ha più una voce, la mia Flaca. (Scego 2008, 415)

How many languages did the Flaca speak? In the end she didn’t even know anymore, my poor friend. She used to grumble. The tragedy had permanently taken from her the ability to articulate meaningful discourses. In moments of calm she wrote in her notebooks. (...) Those bastards had stolen the sounds from her. (...) *Con cara fea le han cortado su alma, su voz. No tiene voz, mí Flaca.* With a mean face they have ripped out her soul, her voice. My Flaca no longer has a voice.¹²

However, this is when Miranda really comes to the fore in the narrative and, like in a virtual relay, Rosa passes on her role as a witness to Miranda. Through the notebooks written by *la Flaca*, Miranda gives voice to the *desaparecidos* – the disappeared – and the survivors as part of her process of growing awareness and redemption: “Però ora io, Miranda, tua madre, una donna, scrivo. Trasformo il pianto in una lingua, in una ribellione. Prima ero sfocata (...) Quasi inutile. Non riuscivo a vedermi, a farmi vedere” [“But now I, Miranda, your mother, a woman, I do write. I turn tears into language, into rebellion. Before I was blurry (...) Almost useless. I was unable to see myself, to be seen”] (Scego 2008, 415). In a way, both women lost their voices in Argentina: *la Flaca* physically because of the trauma, Miranda metaphorically because of her sense of guilt. Individually unable to express themselves and tell the story of their people, they succeed by joining forces after they reunite in Rome. Miranda tries to save *la Flaca*, but she is beyond saving. Then Miranda, elaborating on her relationship with *la Flaca* within the *Matria*-sphere, comes to terms with her mistakes and assumes a performative role,

¹² An English translation of *Oltre Babilonia* exists. Due to difficulties in obtaining the published English version of the novel, the translations here are mine.

through which she can exercise her agency by telling both *la Flaca*'s and her own story. Miranda does this not to absolve herself but rather to take on a role in the construction of collective memory, which begins with telling her daughter the truth: "Ora che ti ho raccontato della Flaca, del mio più grande affetto, ecco, la mia immagine riappare. Sono qui, una *reaparecida*" ["Now that I have told you about *la Flaca*, about my greatest friendship, here, my image reappears. Here I am, a *reaparecida*¹³"] (Scego 2008, 415). The episode is pivotal in interpreting the concept of *Matria* in the sense that it highlights its healing function while simultaneously corroborating the idea that gendered relationships within *Matria* are not limited to Somali characters.

***Matria*'s healing potential**

The concept of the *Matria*-sphere is a way of highlighting and mapping the network of variables that are negotiated by characters as they resist patriarchal power and co-create new forms of belonging. This process has a healing potential, not only for the women but for the entire society, as suggested by the characters of Barni and Ardo in Ali Farah's first novel, *Madre piccola*. By chance, one of the main characters and narrators, Barni, meets Ardo, a young pregnant woman. Both are Somali refugees living in Rome; before their departure from Somalia, both experienced different degrees of the clan-based conflict. Barni notices Ardo straightaway because Ardo wears "two earrings in the finest pure gold filigree. Embedded in the centre was a tiger's eye" (Ali Farah 2011, 131). In those earrings, Barni feels sure she recognizes the only memento that she had possessed of her mother. The earrings had been stolen from her at a random military

checkpoint in Mogadishu at the beginning of the Somali Civil War. Seeing Ardo's earrings unleashes a jumble of irrepressible thoughts and feelings in Barni:

If Ardo had those earrings, then she surely had to be one of them, one of those bushboys who called us filthy pigs. She had to be one who had taken possession of my tiger eyes, eyes that were mine by right. (Ali Farah 2011, 151)

Without realizing it, Barni is suddenly immersed in the clan-based, oppositional mindset of the failed Somali *Patria*. The earrings become a symbol of the violence suffered by Barni when the earrings were taken away from her in Mogadishu. Now in Italy they also represent the division between her and Ardo: "From whom had she received those eyes dripping blood? Liquid, like crimes that soil you. Collective sins to be expiated" (Ali Farah 2011, 156). Despite her feelings, Barni, a midwife, helps Ardo give birth. She overcomes her inherited prejudices and carries out her professional duties to her best ability. Only when she sees the new mother and daughter safely together does she feel that the time has come to appease her demons: she asks Ardo about the earrings. Then Ardo tells her that several years earlier she worked as a cleaner for an Italian woman who was very fond of her. When Ardo decided to change jobs, the *signora* gave her a gift:

Before Ardo, another Somali girl had worked in that house. The lady spoke about her all the time, especially since the girl had disappeared from one moment to the next, without warning. Well, this girl had left several things behind, among which there were two gold earrings of the purest filigree. Embedded in the centre was a tiger's eye. (Ali Farah 2011, 159)

When Ardo relates this story, Barni no longer feels so sure that the earrings are hers. Now

¹³ Made-up word playing with the one used to indicate the victims of the Argentinian dictatorship's brutality, the *desaparecidos* (the disappeared), and the idea of reappearing, now that she has found her voice: I am a reappeared.

she feels at peace with Ardo, and their inter-generational friendship is set to flourish. The *Matria*-sphere that their relationship makes manifest can transcend the residues of the violent *Patria* in their lives, cure a personal, emotional wound from the past, and begin a healing process for a safer and brighter future.

Conclusion

In her poem “Strappo”, Ali Farah articulates an imagery of heartening and beneficial female relationships, in which women create a collective, empowering identity through positive self-definition. Readers can glimpse a journey towards healing, overcoming the burden of various forms of violence to which Somali women and women of mixed Somali heritage – even all women – are exposed to in a patriarchal society. These forms of violence include those associated with histories of imperial aggression. Among other prolific writers of postcolonial Somali literature in Italian, Scego, Ali Farah, and Mohamed Aden have portrayed resistance to such violence through their female characters, showing them in contemporary domestic situations where they form empowering friendships, elective families, communities, and networks that facilitate the (re)acquisition of agency. The female protagonists created by these authors are rarely heroic in the traditional masculine sense. Although they sometimes engage with great notable historical events, such as the Somali Civil War or the Argentinian coup, they are unable to influence the outcomes of such occurrences, even when they carry the burden of the failed Somali *Patria* in their individual histories. Usually, the women are represented as dealing with modest chores and everyday worries, but determinedly countering and defusing instances of the layered violence of patriarchal colonialism that have shaped and remain in their lives. They embody the daily struggles with which both Italian and global readers can easily identify. Perceiving this proximity can facilitate the engagement with

the past and encourage the process towards a decolonized future.

In this article, I have demonstrated how the characters create belonging and overcome social violence through the sisterhood of friendship.¹⁴ The article has discussed ways in which resilient women, ready to adapt to new circumstances and create a community of empowering relationships, survive and thrive. Female characters find self-acceptance and agency by befriending an ally with whom they can heal from the lingering effects of patriarchal, Somali clan-based violence, even when perpetrated by a family member. The *Matria*-sphere can be defined as a way of interpreting active means and alternative spaces within and beyond the Somali diaspora that are safe from inherited violence, and performatively constitute an elective rather than a traditional family. As such – and because the *Matria*-sphere cannot be completely contained within the physical borders of a nation – it may prove to be an alternative, even a ‘radical’ literary image. In the early 1990s, McClintock asserted that women have long been subverting the usual nationalist paradigm:

If women have come to do men’s work, men have not come to share women’s work. Nowhere has feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than the maidservant to nationalism. A crucial question remains for progressive nationalism: can the iconography of the family be retained as the figure for national unity, or must an alternative, radical iconography be developed? (1993, 78)

McClintock’s “crucial question” undoubtedly continues to concern the interdependent histories of postcolonial nation-states, nationalism, and patriarchy.

¹⁴ In addition to the texts discussed here, there are also other stories, such as “Nadia” (2010) by Mohamed Aden, which showcase the self-alienation and disconnection that result when a character refuses to exercise her agency and passively accepts living in an outdated space deriving from her Somali clan heritage.

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