

# Rethinking Identity with Second-Generation Female Writers

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In recent years, Italy has seen a rapid flourishing of second-generation female writers who are contributing to the development of a post-structuralist and post-colonial debate. Not only do their texts document and denounce the challenges and difficulties faced daily by migrants in Italy, but they also, and more importantly, inspire fruitful reflection on the concept of identity. They portray complex characters with ever-evolving identities that deconstruct the essentialist conception of identity that has characterised Western society since ancient times and is the root cause of social oppression.

Western societies have traditionally understood identity as an expression of the individual's true being. This idea is influenced by Plato's doctrine of conceptual essentialism, the belief that any existing thing has an essence, a set of stable and fixed attributes that makes them exist and appear for what they *really* are.<sup>1</sup>

Across centuries, dominant groups have used identity essentialism to justify hierarchical social structures and the oppression of minorities.<sup>2</sup> The idea that a person's identity is defined by their supposed essence implies that their social role and position objectively reflect their true value and that, therefore, social structures objectively reflect structures in nature,

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<sup>1</sup> Karen J. Warren, 'Plato and Diotima. Introduction', in *An Unconventional History of Western Philosophy: Conversation between Men and Women Philosophers*, ed. by Karen J. Warren (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2008), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Nur Soylu Yalcinkaya, Sara Estrada-Villalta, Glenn Adams, 'The (Biological or Cultural) Essence of Essentialism: Implications for Policy Support among Dominant and Subordinated Groups', *Front Psychol*, 8(2017), <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5447748/>> [Accessed 11 April 2022].

from which it results that those at the top of the social hierarchy are inherently better and more suited to rule over the others.<sup>3</sup>

Second-generation female authors in Italy are challenging this assumption in their texts, as this article explores. To this end, this article will examine the idea of identity as an ever-evolving social product that emerges in three short stories, 'India' and 'Ruben' by Indian–Italian author Gabriella Kuruvilla, and 'Sausages' by Somali–Italian author Igiaba Scego. These three texts were published in *Pecore Nere*, in English 'Black Sheep', an anthology of eight stories by four second-generation female writers active in Italy – Igiaba Scego, Gabriella Kuruvilla, Ingy Mubiayi and Laila Wadia –, which mostly deal with experiences of migration and concepts of identity. Kuruvilla and Scego have diverse backgrounds and family stories, and their texts deal with the concept of identity quite differently.<sup>4</sup>

Kuruvilla was born to an Italian mother and Indian father in Milan in 1969. Her father had left India when he was young and started a career as a GP in Brianza, a province of the Lombardy region.<sup>5</sup> After studying architecture, Kuruvilla worked as a visual artist, writer, and journalist for numerous newspapers, such as *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Repubblica* and *Internazionale*. In addition to 'India' and 'Ruben', she has published two novels, *Media chiara e noccioline* (2001), under the pseudonym Viola Chandra, and *Milano fin qui tutto bene* (2012), a collection of short stories, *È vita, dolcezza* (2008), and a children's story, *Questa non è una baby sitter* (2010).

In both 'India' and 'Ruben', Kuruvilla's split identity serves to deconstruct identity essentialism and, in particular, the idea that physical traits and identity culture – conceived as a set of habits, customs, behaviours, and modes of thinking and perceiving – are interconnected and determined by a set of essential attributes shared by all members of a given nation.<sup>6</sup> Since the Industrial Revolution, after which the delimitation of territories became more precise, in order to maintain territorial unity and even justify their existence, political authorities circulated the idea that nations gather people having common biological and cultural characteristics and that these characteristics, though innate, are

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<sup>3</sup> Tara M. Mandalaywala, David M. Amodio, Marjorie Rhodes, 'Essentialism Promotes Racial Prejudice by Increasing Endorsement of Social Hierarchies', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 9.4 (2018), pp. 461-469 (461).

<sup>4</sup> The collection 'Pecore Nere' in English 'Black Sheep' has not yet been translated into English. However, 'Salsicce', in English 'Sausages', by Igiaba Scego and 'Ruben' by Gabriella Kuruvilla have been translated by Victoria Offredi and Poletto Giovanna Bellesia Contuzzi. The authors of this article will use therefore quotations from their translations. For 'India', Dalila Villella will make a translation of the quotations used.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriella Kuruvilla, 'Ruben', trans. by Victoria Offredi and Poletto Giovanna Bellesia

Contuzzi, *The Massachusetts Review*, [https://www.massreview.org/sites/default/files/09\\_59.3Kuruvilla.pdf](https://www.massreview.org/sites/default/files/09_59.3Kuruvilla.pdf), [Accessed 6 April 2022], pp. 438-446 (p. 439). Henceforth, all references to this volume will occur in the text preceded by 'Ruben'.

Gabriella Kuruvilla, 'India', in *Pecore Nere*, 2nd edn. (Roma: Laterza, 2005), pp. 69-82 (p.

<sup>6</sup> 'The (Biological or Cultural) Essence of Essentialism', [online] [Accessed 18 April 2022].

determined by the interconnection between genes and soil.<sup>7</sup> This engendered the creation of stereotypes, general assumptions on how the members of a given nation are, appear, talk, think, and behave, and an imagined community to which people belong on the basis of their common physical and cultural characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

In both short stories, Kuruvilla explains that she feels composed of two irreconcilable parts, the Eastern and Western.

I was made up of two halves that did not fit together, that did not communicate. (Ruben, p. 439).

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Exactly when I was starting to neatly perceives all the nuances of my identity, everything became clear: I clearly was a creature that caused astonishment and embarrassment, an enigmatic confusion between East and West.

*Proprio mentre cominciavo ad avere una percezione più nitida di tutte le sfaccettature della mia identità, tutto mi divenne più chiaro: evidentemente ero una creatura che originava stupore e imbarazzo, un'enigmatica confusione tra Oriente e Occidente.*<sup>9</sup>

Although Kuruvilla was born and grew up in Milan, due to her appearance she never fully felt part of the Italian community. Her dark skin and black curly hair always prevented her from fitting into the stereotype of the Italian woman, which caused her to feel a sense of alienation. Likewise, her Western manners and habits have always caused her to feel a sense of exclusion from the Indian community. During her journey to India, her behaviour and fashion style attracted the attention of people on the street, which made her feel different and foreign:

I had some Indian traits but my behavior was typically foreign; I was Indian but at the same time I was not, I was foreign but not completely. I just had to choose between learning how to live surrounded by curious eyes or mitigate my western characteristics. I chose the first solution because I did not want to renounce to what I really was.

*Possedevo alcuni tratti indiani ma il mio comportamento era tipicamente straniero; ero indiana ma al tempo stesso non lo ero, ero straniera ma non completamente tale. Non mi restava che scegliere fra imparare a vivere tra gli sguardi curiosi o mitigare le mie caratteristiche occidentali; optai per la prima soluzione perché non volevo rinunciare a ciò che ero.* ('India', pp. 75–76).

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<sup>7</sup> Metodi Siromahov, Michael Buhrmester, Ryan McKay 'Beliefs in national continuity are related to essentialist thinking and to perceptions of the nation as a family.', *Nations and Nationalism*, 26 (2020), 845-863; Eldo Lima Leite and others, 'Nationalism, Patriotism, Essentialism in the Construction of Brazilian National Identity', *Temas psicol.*, 26.4 (2018), 2077-2089 (pp. 2079-2081);

<sup>8</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/nana.12640>

<sup>9</sup> Gabriella Kuruvilla, 'India', in *Pecore Nere*, 2nd edn. (Roma: Laterza, 2005), pp. 69-82 (p. 75). Henceforth, Henceforth, all references to this volume will occur in the text preceded by 'India'.

All this reveals the impossibility of fitting physical and cultural stereotypes and thus the limits of essentialism in explaining one's cultural and ethnical identity which tend to simplify complex biological and social processes.

As an individual of biracial background, Kuruvilla's feelings about her identity challenge the idea that belonging to a community depends on homogeneous and common traits that would make them appear, think, and behave in the same way. Kuruvilla's physical traits make her appear foreign in the eyes of Italians, whereas her manners make her appear foreign in the eyes of Indians. This is because cultural identity and physical traits are distinct features that result from different processes. Cultural identity results from a complex process of interaction between diverse social agents.<sup>10</sup> Physical traits result from random biological processes and are in no way revelatory of our cultural identity.<sup>11</sup>

Although most physical traits are fixed and determined at birth, cultural identity is fluid and changes throughout time in relation to our experiences and the social environments we are exposed to.<sup>12</sup> Homi Kharshedji Bhabha's concept of 'third space' perfectly enlightens this idea. With this concept, Bhabha suggested that cultural identity is determined by cultural negotiation and thus necessarily fluid and hybrid.<sup>13</sup> This is perfectly represented in Kuruvilla's 'Ruben', and in 'Sausages' by Scego. In 'Ruben', Kuruvilla talks about her pregnancy as a social event that reshapes a person's life, and thus time is required for a parent to internalise their new role with the birth of the baby<sup>14</sup>. She explains that when she found out that she was pregnant, she did not want the baby and often behaved carelessly towards him; she smoked and rode her bike. (*Ruben*, p. 440-441) This initial refusal was justified by the fact that the arrival of her son, Ruben, would have changed her routines and habits, something for which she was not ready, and this reopened the debate about her identity that had haunted her since childhood.<sup>15</sup> For people of biracial backgrounds, the transformation triggered by parenthood can be even more challenging than for others as it inevitably and profoundly questions their sense of self and belonging.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter L. Bergen, Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality. A social treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Doubleday: New York, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> 'Hereditary', *Britannica Encyclopaedia*, <<https://www.britannica.com/science/heredity-genetics>>, [Accessed 11 April 2022].

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Aronson, 'The development and transformation of female identities under changing historical conditions', in *Self and Identity Through the Life Course in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Timothy Owens (Stamford: Jai Press, Inc., 2000), pp. 77-98 (p. 94).

<sup>13</sup> Homi K., Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Francesca Mosca, Anne-Marie Garnier, 'Devenir Parent. Une étrange métamorphose', *Thérapie Familial*, 2.36 (2015), pp. 167-186 (169-170).

<sup>15</sup> Luisanna Sardu, 'Politics of Recognition and Devotion: Motherhood at Stake between Identity and Race in Gabriella Kuruvilla's short story, "Ruben"', *La fusta* (2014), <<http://italian.rutgers.edu/graduate-program/italiangraduate-society/la-fusta/62-departmental-services/publications/219-la-fusta2014>>, pp. 1-12, (5).

In 'Sausages' by Scego, identity fluidity takes on a completely different meaning and is analysed from a completely different perspective than in Kuruvilla. The character of Sausages explains that she is a woman with multiple identities, which suggests identity not only changes slowly throughout time as a result of social events, such as with the arrival of a baby, but can also change slightly on a daily basis during particular occasions and social rituals.

I feel Somali when 1) I drink tea with cardamom, cloves and cinnamon; 2) I pray five times a day facing Mecca; 3) I wear my dirah (2); 4) I burn incense and unsi (3) [...] 13) Plus 100 other things I just can't remember right now!  
I feel Italian when: 1) I eat something sweet for breakfast; 2) I go to art exhibitions, museums and historic buildings; 3) I talk about sex, men and depression with my girlfriends; [...] 13) plus 100 other things I can't keep track of!<sup>16</sup>

Scego's dual and fluid identity causes her to feel excluded from both the Somali and the Italian communities. Scego was born in Rome in 1974. She is the daughter of Ali Omar Scego, a former minister and ambassador of Somalia. Her family left Somalia after the 1969 Siad Barre coup d'état.<sup>17</sup> Scego gained a PhD in Pedagogy from University Roma 3 and works as a journalist for various leftist Italian magazines, such as *L'Unità*, *Internazionale* and *Il Manifesto*.<sup>18</sup> She began her career as a writer in 2003 with the publication of *La nomade che amava Hitchcock*. Amongst her most important publications are *La strana notte di Vito Renica*, *leghista meridionale*, *Rhoda* (2004), *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010), *Adua* (2015) and *La linea del colore* (2020).

According to S. A. Smythe, Scego's 'Sausages' illustrates how 'human desires and political demands for belonging exceed the project of citizenship.'<sup>19</sup> From day one, the literary works by authors of African descent that have been placed under the rubric of the Italian diaspora have offered a persistent exploration of their multi-layered yet fragmented identities.

About her problematised identity, Scego writes: 'It's a big problem, identity is'. And what if we got rid of it altogether; in fact, 'Sausages'

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<sup>16</sup> Igiaba Scego, 'Sausages', trans. by Giovanna Bellesia and Victoria Offredi Poletto, *Warscapes*, <<http://www.warscapes.com/retrospectives/food/sausages>>, [Accessed 11 April 2022]. Henceforth, all references to this volume will occur in the text preceded by 'Sausages'.

<sup>17</sup> 'Igiaba Scego [Itay]', *internationals literaturfestival berlin*, <<https://www.literaturfestival.com/autoren-en/autoren-2010-en/igiaba-scego>> [Accessed 18 April 2022].

<sup>18</sup> Camilla Skalle, 'The quest for identity through bodily pain. Female abjection in the literary work of Igiaba Scego', *borderland*, 18.1 (2019), 64-87 (p. 64); Vittorio Valentino, 'L'œuvre d'Igiaba Scego, femme et écrivaine : une vision interculturelle de l'héritage postcoloniale', *Lettere*, (2014), 1-27 (p. 22) <[https://www.altrelettere.uzh.ch/article/view/al\\_uzh-21/313](https://www.altrelettere.uzh.ch/article/view/al_uzh-21/313)> [Accessed 11 May 2022].

<sup>19</sup> SA Smythe, "Black Italianità: Citizenship And Belonging In The Black Mediterranean", *California Italian Studies*, 9.1 (2019), <<https://doi.org/10.5070/c391042328>> [Accessed 8 May].

deploys the autobiographical dilemma of a black, Italo-Somali, female author, willing to forcefully demonstrate to herself and to the entire nation that she is a deserving Italian, in no way a potential victim of the Bossi-Fini law. Despite being born Italian, and holding a ‘burgundy red’ passport that ‘proclaims, to all intents and purposes, [my] Italian nationality’ (Sausages [online]), Scego’s internalised identity has been so troubled by the intersection of her non-canonical-Italian features, of her diverse culture, religion, ethnicity and culinary habits, that she begins to doubt whether her passport is speaking the truth and whether ‘deep down’ she is ‘truly Italian’. Not only is the writer’s formal Italian identity endangered by her Somali roots, but it is also threatened by the lingering legacy of Italian sexism and racism.

To overcome the influence of the essentialist Italian mentality, Scego decides to negotiate her troubled identity through food. The Sunni Muslim protagonist of ‘Salsicce’ intends to devour sausages just to prove her Italian identity; however, her inability to do so, further demarks her non-belonging to either of the two citizenships: ‘I am not a 100% anything. I have never been, and I don't think I can be now. I think I am a woman with no identity. Better yet, a woman with several identities’ (‘Sausages’ [Online]). In the author’s attempt to establish herself through food, she imagines herself eating sausages just to undo this identarian duality, to let the Italian component prevail and to prove she is entitled to belong entirely to one place. In fact, she realises she cannot be just *one*: the smell of sausages makes her sick to the point that she cannot keep herself from vomiting in disgust, but more importantly, she later feels horrified for having thought she could eat them. Scego cannot avoid her inner duality as this is what represents her.

As the she claimed during an interview for Radio 3, her identity is complex and fragmented:

I am Roman but I am not certain about the rest. I do not like choosing among my identities. I feel myself to belong to the border generation, the crossroads generation. One is everything and its reverse, Italian and Somali or something else that goes beyond citizenship. (‘Sausages’ [online])

It could be argued that Scego’s identarian discomfort is two-fold: first, on the psychological side, it impacts her cultural and religious affiliation while making her feel inadequate and sometimes unable to be neither one nor dual. Second, it translates into physical self-harm, as the attempted ingestion of the raw sausages provokes in her a sort of bulimic vomiting: a self-violated female body becomes the symbol of cultural encounter.

When identity is at stake, as often happens with Italian migrant female authors, the hyphen which fragments their literary ethnic belonging comes to represent their inner divide.<sup>20</sup> These women reflect upon their

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<sup>20</sup> Francesco Durante, ‘Italy and the Literature of Immigration’, in *Words without Borders*, tr. by Antony Shugaar, 2016, <<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/september-2016-italy-the-literature-of-immigration-francesco-durante>>, [Accessed 11 May 2022].

multiple and liminal identities 'as if their cultures were mirrors of each other'.<sup>21</sup>

As Spivak points out, their writing is self-reflective: it is through their texts that the world is 'worlding'<sup>22</sup> (Spivak, 1999), therefore enabling their existence to become more real. In a world still too often dominated by essentialist discourses, voicing their troubled identity is the only way to free identity from the constraints that society imposes on them and to allow complexity to arise. Texts by second-generation female writers de-essentialise identity by creating the existential horizon where we can live authentically and express the fluidity of our subjectivities.

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<sup>21</sup> Moira Luraschi, 'Beyond Words: Mirroring Identities of Italian Post-colonial Women', *Enquire*, 2.1 (2009), pp. 64-83.

<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique Of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 74. With the term 'worldling', Spivak describes how the colonised space is made into 'the colonized space' (worlding) for the natives by their colonial masters through acts like cartography, writing, or even just travelling over the colonised land.

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