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ITALIAN CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN SOMALIA. A RECIPROCITY?

1. PREMISE

SOMALIS have seldom spoken or written about their country for a number of reasons. These include the predominantly oral culture in which they have been educated and the inevitable political implications of an historical debate surrounding a colonial past that coincides with the birth of their country. Such motives have limited the potential circulation of Somalian voices in studies of history and within the media.

To write about Somalia (we emphasise writing, an event, a novelty in Somalia's typically oral culture) from Italy serves to maintain a link with one's homeland. A tie that is simultaneously personal and indirectly historical, with Italy. Yet in the particular historic moment we inhabit, it is too frequently difficult to discern the importance of the role Italy has had in the history of Somalia. This is because it often appears to be less wearing to repress the past than to attempt understanding via research and memory. We suggest that an awareness of the historical link between Italy and Somalia must be preserved in the face of difficult times and of the indifference with which it has been regarded over the past decade. For this reason we draw attention to the topic and hope to inspire a vision that would valorize rather than ignore the plight of Somalis.

One could speak about Somalia on many different levels; be they conceptual, socially analytical, economic or cultural. Many scholars have highlighted Somalia's cultural and linguistic homogeneity, classifying Somalia as the perfect example of the nation state. Others have discussed Somalia as a country characterized by an elevated degree of social division due to tribal societal paradigms which lean towards social anarchy and fragmentation rather than unity. Some have privileged an idealized and generalized pastoral form of democracy in Somalia. A number have viewed the country as classically post-colonial insofar as it was forced to adopt a post-colonial perception of history at the time of its formation when, under colonial influence, prefabricated notions of the past, institutional models and political systems were inherited. There is merit in each of these historical perspectives which instill their own set of problems, creating multiple visions of reality that advance different solutions to the country's crises.

Rather than seeking to contribute a possible outline of the history of colonialism as it was experienced by the colonized, the considerations that follow are a series of starting points to cultivate deeper awareness of the meaning of colonialism for Somalis and for Somalia. Such awareness could be the beginning of a non-apologetic history capable of

providing necessary and accurate answers to questions from conflicting positions. With this premise, we attempt to illustrate the reality of Somalia, give an overview of the cultural influences and «colonial legacies», and to elucidate the oversights of Somalian scholars. In the latter part of the article, we reflect on the ways in which writers within the diaspora might engender a contemporary reciprocity between Somalia and Italy.

2. SOMALIA'S COLONIAL PAST IN THE PRESENT: A PARTICULAR VISION OF HISTORY

Situated near the Arabian peninsula,¹ the Horn of Africa has for centuries been a landing place subject to colonization by populations from the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. These colonizers settled along the coastline in successive waves and gradually migrated from the North to the South towards the center of the Somalian peninsula, superimposing² themselves on the native populations such as the Bantu, today considered a minority in Somalia.³ Lacking a direct understanding of Somalian society, certain Africanist scholars have relied exclusively on studies undertaken during colonial domination which claim that the Bantu population had its origins in slavery, in spite of evidence that the Somali Bantu are, historically, free communities and largely aboriginal to Somalia.

During the period of colonial division of Somalia, most of the territory was allocated to Italian domination. The relative importance Italy attributed to Somalia – compared with, for instance, the Abyssinian empire, which included Eritrea – determined its consequent development as a colony. Prior to colonization, Somalia's agricultural economics operated in autarky while the coastal centers of the North and the South maintained

¹ Somalis are believed to have populated the Horn of Africa around AD 1000. The majority of Somalis were nomadic pastoralists who as a result of geographic and climatic factors embarked on a vast movement inland from the Gulf of Aden. Those who settled among the Bantu cultivators in the south adjusted to a more sedentary existence built around agricultural activities, whereas the majority of Somalis continued a mainly pastoral existence. *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of the World* (1993), The Economist Intelligence Unit, p. 54.

² Tommaso Carletti maintains that: «È certo che in secoli non lontani gruppi compatti di Somali si riversarono dalle terre sabbiose e rocciose, prive d'acqua, del Nord verso le regioni bagnate dai due fiumi, l'Uebi Scebeli e il Giuba. Li avviava la fame e li attraeva il miraggio d'una terra promessa. Gli invasori, soggiogate le popolazioni autoctone, si confusero con esse secondo l'eterna vicenda umana e si stabilirono nelle loro sedi. Ciò spiegherebbe che la purità della razza Somala vada gradatamente attenuandosi da nord-est verso sud-ovest, a partire dal Capo degli aromi, verso lo Scebeli ed il Giuba, lunghesso la costa e fino alle propaggini dell'altopiano abissino e ciò spiega pure come le popolazioni, nostre suddite, della Somalia Meridionale appaiono, anche per caratteri somatici esteriori, non immuni da commistioni con sangue negro bantù». See CARLETTI, TOMMASO (1912), *I problemi del Benadir*, Viterbo, Stabilimento Tipografico G. Agnesotti.

³ «La più antica popolazione della Somalia, di cui abbiamo notizia, è quella dei negri Bantù». CERULLI, ENRICO (1957), *Somalia. Testi editi ed inediti*, 1, «Lingua e Storia», p. 161.

commercial trade with the outside world. Not possessing a fleet proper, these small centres of the country became landing docks for colonial and oriental empires rather than being employed as actual commercial centers modeled on the example of medieval Italy's maritime Republics. Trade with the outside world was established through personal networks and was conducted in the currency of the most astute of the commercial partners upon visiting the coastal town or by bartering.

By the end of the 18th century, a Sultan from Muscat, Oman, who dominated Zanzibar island (off the Tanganika coast), extended his authority and interests to several Benadir ports (the noun 'Benadir' here denotes the entire Southern Somalia). At a time and in a place in which a sovereign or centralized state was unheard of, the Sultan's administration of the ports of Benadir was to constitute the sole power beside that of the traditional authorities customarily and autonomously formed by each tribe. It was into this geopolitical climate that the European colonizers entered at the end of the 19th century.

Territorial conquest, a common feature of colonial politics during the Fascist regime more than at other times, would bear upon the formation of cultural and political categories of the Somalian state in important ways. The widespread militarism that continues to characterize Somalian political culture is one such effect and may be directly linked to colonial politics during the Fascist period. The framing by the colonial troops of only one part of the population was to be the only form of collaboration between the subjects and the metropolitan government that saw the subjects in a relationship of subordination rather than in one of entire subjection to colonial power. In the agricultural colonization of Benadir, on the other hand, the relationship was one of subjection of the rural populations of the Southern agricultural areas. Through these differential relations a system of racial discrimination was implemented, altering the ways in which ethnic groups related to one another.

Colonial politics in fact produced social effects and cultural influences that would persist into present times. The mechanization of agriculture on agrarian plantation farms, introduced by Italian agents, is one of these. While successfully performed in the production sector designed to increase exports, the mechanization failed to infiltrate domestic agricultural methods practiced by cereal growers, one of Somalia's most vulnerable groups alongside livestock farmers. The employees of these two sectors would be subjected, in various ways, to the actions of colonial policies.

The farm workers and agricultural population endured colonial politics directly when forced recruitment and the employment of a servant workforce for agricultural deals were implemented and, indirectly, when taxes on cultivation permits for indigenous plots were introduced; in particular, an excise duty on huts under De Vecchi (1923-1928).⁴ The imme-

⁴ The adoption of such taxes shaped the period's fiscal regime in an especially discriminatory fashion. The hardest hit were the agricultural and agro-pastoral populations, who were the most easily reached and controlled by colonial clout and thus the most heavily taxed.

diate effect of these policies was a clear division between nomads and sedentary agricultural farmers from rural areas: the two constituent realities, in other words, of Somalian society.⁵

The decolonization of Somalia occurred after the fall of the Fascist regime in Italy and came about as a virtually improvised process that drew together Somalis unprepared for an independent democratic government. The Somalian nation state was created in the image of urban colonial institutions and thus emerged without precedents in Somalian cultural attitudes and laws.

The 'Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia' (AFIS) lasted from 1950 until 1960, a relatively short period in terms of the human resources available and the quantity of work needed to prepare the entire nation for the constitution of an actual nation state for the first time in its history. The fragmented vision of Somalia's political administrators, moreover, would become one of the key obstacles to the realization of many a good intention. In the ten years of the AFIS Somalia would experience four alternating administrators, each with his own idiosyncratic method of finding solutions for growing unrest. The powerful activism of the nationalist group 'Lega dei Giovani Somali' was initially the source of some apprehension in the Italian administrators who approached the group with a view to curb their extremist tendencies. The aim of this was to pave the way for a new ruling class which would be able to mediate between the various interests.⁶

The nation state formed in conjunction with the AFIS was ill-equipped to deal with the myriad social, economic, cultural and political problems of the day. Borrowed from Italian political parameters, the institutional models and the politically representative organizations married with Somalian law, culture and tribal traditions, giving birth to a patriarchal order of the State. This conception of politics would render tribal hegemony the only possible method of governance within Somalia.

The combination of the clan structure and a modern style of political administration would produce the conditions of a dictatorship in which clan and tribal domination, social injustice and the alignment of the Somalian State with the heritage of a particular clan or tribe in power were the order of the day. Democracy in an independent Somalia was

⁵ «La dicotomia formale, socialmente espressa, tra società nomade pastorale e società sedentaria agricola ha la sua origine nel periodo coloniale, allorché i governanti coloniali decisero, sulla base della strategia di conquista del territorio, quali sarebbero gli strumenti più adeguati e convenienti nell'assoggettamento della popolazione del meridione della Somalia». AHAD, ALI MUMIN (2002), *Dall'oralità alla scrittura. Prospettive nuove per la letteratura somala. Gli scrittori della diaspora*, a cura di Armando Gnisci, Noxa Moll, Roma, Edizioni Interculturali, p. 119.

⁶ According to Angelo Del Boca: «Le tappe della formazione di questa classe dirigente, disposta a mediare gli interessi stranieri, le abbiamo viste ricostruendo la storia della Lega dei Giovani Somali, prima avversata e poi combattuta dall'AFIS, poi attratta con la 'politica della biada' e svuotata di certi suoi contenuti sociali e progressisti, ed infine depurata dell'ala oltranzista e premiata con il potere politico e la graduale immissione nelle attività economiche del paese». DEL BOCA, ANGELO (1976), *Nostalgia delle colonie in Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, vol. IV, Bari, Laterza, p. 301.

performed pluralistically only insofar as large numbers of tribal political structures were present; in reality, these tribes all fell under the authority of one party, the 'Lega dei Giovani Somali'. Agricultural plantation and livestock farming would continue to act as the main draw cards of the national economy, yielding monopolistic profits. Unable to address the wider need for development of a socioeconomic reality still anchored to archaic methods of production, the returns of these two sectors failed to be reinvested into the local economy. Such political incompetence was tied to yet another instance of financial mismanagement.

We may identify two key problems deriving from the system of plantation managers and agricultural agents that would have negative repercussions on the lives of the Somali population. The first of these is related to the backwardness of the agricultural systems of production for local consumption while the second concerns the conditions of extreme poverty and exploitation afflicting Somali farm workers. The rise of a Somalian bourgeoisie, tantamount to the post-colonial political class which inherited colonial economic and political power, took over the position of Italian banana growers. In this way, akin to many African countries, Somalia experienced decolonization as simply the substitution of one (colonial) power with another (national) that shared similar traits with its predecessor. The running of the Somalian state was limited in this sense to nothing short of the preservation of the privileges acquired during the transition between powers.

Following what has proved to be the general trend of development of institutions within newly independent countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with some features peculiar to Somalian culture and society, democracy (defined as a multi-partisan system of parliament) ended after a decade of the birth of the Somalian Republic. Nationalism in Somalia would turn out to be little more than an instrument directed towards a participation in the spoils of the colonial legacy vis-à-vis material wealth, prestige and power in the management of scarce resources. Ernest Gellner aptly synthesizes the uniqueness of the Somalian style of nationalism with its overtones of tribalism:

The Somalis are one of the examples of the blending of old tribalism based on social structure with the new, anonymous nationalism based on shared culture. The sense of lineage affiliation is strong and vigorous (notwithstanding the fact that it is officially reprobated, and its invocation actually proscribed), and it is indeed crucial for the understanding of internal politics.⁷

During the cold war period Somalia occupied a strategic geopolitical position and, therefore, attracted the attention of both superpowers who sought to take strategic advantage within the region. In this way, Somalia became an object of interest in the power bloc ideology.

Together with the country's cultural and social characteristics, the Cold War conditions favoured the operation of a patriarchal system of government, founded on resource

⁷ GELLNER, ERNEST (1983), *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. 85.

management and international aid. A change in these conditions resulted in the collapse of the government's regime and its institutions.⁸

To promote a resurgence of democratic institutions in Somalia we might begin to revisit that period of the past in order to research Somalia's forced subjection to an intentionally inaccurate colonial historiography to correct these 'errors of history'. This critical process of historical revision, already tentatively begun, must be attempted with increased serenity and an historiographical approach that seeks not to justify nor to merely excuse or accuse but, rather, to be as objective as possible. In the first few years of the military regime in Somalia, colonial historian Angelo del Boca attempted such a critique:

Il primo e più grave atto di presunzione dell'AFIS è quello di sostenere di avere realizzato in Somalia, con una semplice applicazione di leggi e strumenti italiani, una democrazia parlamentare, esemplare e funzionante.⁹

Italian cultural heritage in Somalia is widespread and often positive. There was a time when the Italian imprint was palpable in Somali schools, professional training, health, culture and in the nomenclature of cities. Evidence of a strong Italian cultural influence in Somalia becomes clear when we begin to enumerate all the Italian words that have entered into, and remain a vital part of, the Somali language. The Italian presence in the future will be important and necessary not solely in the reconstruction of the country, but also to enable the Somali population to emigrate from the conditions of poverty produced by an absence of equal economic opportunity.

3. THE LITERATURE OF THE DIASPORA: A RECIPROCITY?

Rather than being welcomed, recent migrants to Italy have mostly encountered indifference, fear and hostility. Such migrants continue to be viewed as outcasts of Italian society, evident in the term *extracomunitario* that has entered into common usage. The writings of the Somali diaspora pose a number of problems for such attitudes as they call into question preconceived notions of Italian identity.

Jennifer Burns views the literature of migrants in Italy as an «enterprise of mapping incalculable space» in that, being composed in a European language, the different experiences and mentalities intrinsic to the «immigrant in our literary culture» cast doubt on «our

⁸ «In the fields of education and health, a sharp decline occurred and only minimal services continued to exist. Because of the destruction of schools and supporting services, a whole generation of Somalis faced the prospect of a return to illiteracy. Many people who had fled to the cities initially because of the civil war sought refuge in camps elsewhere, often refugee camps outside Somalia. More than one year of civil war had wiped out most of the intellectual and material progress of the preceding thirty years. In short, Somali society had retrogressed to a collection of warring clans reminiscent of pre-industrial times». somalinet.com/library/somalia/?so=0066.

⁹ DEL BOCA, *op. cit.*, p. 301

own pre-defined space [...] Europe».¹⁰ The Somali experience is an important case inasmuch as it is the product of a relationship established under colonial rule. Indeed, the literature of the Somali diaspora may assist us in developing critical insight into Italy's recent colonial past and its role in contemporary Italian culture.

Drawing on the Maghrebi tradition of making oneself hospitable, Armando Gnisci advocates the potential for literature to subvert prejudices and superficiality, indifference, inertia and ignorance as it transports «dalle parti dell'altro».¹¹ In this sense, hospitality is a «process of negotiation» in which difference becomes a «continual shifting of perspectives».¹²

In his recent publication *Creolizzare l'Europa* (2003), Gnisci considers the cultural manifestations of migration – emerging in a creolization of Europe – to offer an alternative to the exploitation of the South by the North, dismantling colonial paradigms.

Accordingly, writer Jarmila Očkayová regards the creolization of Italy as a lesson in reciprocity, capable of creating a polyphony of voices.¹³ Such reciprocity could entail a cultural hybridity¹⁴ that is neither assimilation nor rejection but, moreover, a sort of magnifying glass to better see what is currently escaping us; a lens both for those arriving and for those hosting.¹⁵ Očkayová views the multiethnic laboratory Italy is fast becoming as a momentous occasion for cultural enrichment. The idea of a laboratory is likely to open a context in which to confront the Italian colonial legacy and its link with the present Somali predicament. By reflecting on the writings of the Somali diaspora, previously neglected experiences may be reconsidered as we retrieve repressed memories. Deepening collective awareness of Italy's colonial heritage in Somalia, we might begin to value, rather than to alienate, the cultural contributions of recent migrants to Italy.

3. 1. Representing Somali Society: the Case of Nuruddin Farah

Centred around traditions of orality, the absence of the written word in Somali culture has granted Somali literati a clear 'political' function. The ideological responsibility this entails – towards the Somali community, tribe or clan – commonly limits Somali writers' freedom in articulating their ideas. This frequently overwhelming sense of obligation to safeguard particular values at times thwarts the efforts of Somali writers to adapt

¹⁰ BURNS, JENNIFER (1998), *Recent Immigrant Writing in Italian. A Fragile Enterprise* («The Italianist»), 18, p. 238.

¹¹ GNISCI, ARMANDO (2003), *Creolizzare l'Europa. Letteratura e migrazione*, Roma, Meltemi, p. 59.

¹² BURNS, JENNIFER, *op. cit.* pp. 215-216.

¹³ OČKAYOVÁ, JARMILA (2002), *L'impegno di vivere a cura di Davide Bregola in Da qui verso casa*, Roma, Edizioni Interculturali, p. 61.

¹⁴ For an exploration of this term see the writings of BHABHA, HOMI K., in particular *The Location of Culture*, London-New York, Routledge 1994.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 61.

their traditional customs to changed circumstances. In the case of writers of the diaspora, the balance between art and social commitment is less of an issue insofar as such writers have more scope to decide whether to remain completely tied to tradition or to move in a different direction, away from notions of tribal belonging and orality in favour of new forms of civil society.

Traditionally, the Somali writer represents a figure with an important cultural role in society. His writings, akin to the poetics of orality, must contain a social message. This tradition follows the Somali writers of the diaspora whose responsibility is twofold: they are required, on the one hand, to artistically represent their cultural origins to the world while, simultaneously, working instrumentally to bequeath cultural lessons learned in the host environment to fellow Somalis. As such, their writings are necessarily committed to politics.

Contact with Western culture has sharpened Somalis' approach to the written word. Nowadays several authors choose to write in the Somali language for a domestic audience while others adopt English and write for a wider audience as well as for those Somalis educated in more than one language. The decision to write in a particular language is often made based on locality and proximity to publishing houses. Very few Somalis elect to write in Italian: this is likely the result of poor accessibility to Italian publishing houses which tend to prefer translating works from English or French. The last few years have, however, seen the publication of several young Somali writers of the diaspora. The tardiness and caution with which such works have been published is perhaps due to a perplexity towards the birth of a Somali-Italian literature and, in addition, the establishment of an independent post-colonial studies sector within which we find many writings dealing with the colonial experience, historiography, Italian cultural influences and the need to revisit historical links.

We would do well to also consider the presence of elite Italian speakers in Somalia who have been writing since the early 1990s yet have been unable to publish in Italian. The writings of Nuruddin Farah (1945-) are no exception. The irony inherent in the wide circulation of Farah's recent works¹⁶ (composed in English and translated into Italian), is evident when we consider his unsuccessful attempts to publish his writings in Italy from 1976 until 1979.

For a long time, Farah was the sole representative of Somali oral literature, beginning with the aforementioned trilogy of publications *Sweet and Sour Milk*, *Sardines* and *Close Sesame*. We will discuss this trilogy in terms of the critique it offers of the Somali

¹⁶ Italian interest in Nuruddin Farah came about after the English publication of his works *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979); *Sardines* (1981); *Close Sesame* (1983). Details of the Italian publications are as follows: FARAH, NURUDDIN (1993), *Chinditi sesamo*, Roma, Edizioni Lavoro. IDEM (1993), *Latte agrodolce*, Roma, Edizioni Lavoro. IDEM (1996), *Sardine*, Roma, Edizioni Lavoro. His latest work *Yesterday. Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, an exercise in reportage first released in England and in the United States, was recently translated and published in Italian by Meltemi.

regime (Farah began writing during the 1970s, when scientific socialism was in full swing) including the description of Somali society and the representation of pastoral culture. The combination of these three elements acts as a thread that connects these works, granting them a particular resonance.

3. 2. *A Critique of the Regime*

Farah's critique of the Somali regime throughout the trilogy is in many ways akin to the criticism of young literati and intellectuals who were not a part of any specific association or literary trend. These groups expressed their disapproval of the military regime via songs, plays, and gabay, Somali poetry whose arrangement allowed the postcolonial generation to debate otherwise prohibited topics in the media.¹⁷ Farah's representation of a rupture with clan systems of belonging is the one of the key concerns in his works. His characters include young intellectual bureaucrats who try in vain to alter the tendency towards tribal and clan relations in society on the one hand. On the other, educated women who endeavor to challenge the centuries old cycles oppressing women in Somalia, such as Medina in *Sardines*, reflect Farah's preoccupation with women's liberation as a precondition for political and individual freedom.

3. 3. *The Partial Description of Somali Society: Representing Pastoral Culture*

Farah's trilogy provides excerpts of an accurate representation of the tragic power games played out in 1970s Somalia. Readers glean an introduction to Somali politics from the trilogy's account of family relationships to clan alliances. The generally urban social milieu – Farah's stories are typically located in Mogadishu – in which these relations are played out frequently return to a nomadic or pastoral environment. The intersection of these two realities is sustained and uninterrupted, mirroring the associations and unidirectional forces between relatives who live in a pastoral-nomadic setting and city dwellers. This continuity of nomadic and pastoral traditional customs moulds the behaviour and lives of Farah's characters, determining their choices and shaping their ideas. The presence of these connections in effect binds nomadic society and the interpersonal relationships and political alliances to linkages with clan or tribal belonging.

Farah underscores well the ways in which power as an entity in Somalia cannot be separated from the ubiquitous codified linkages. While such bonds are undeniably crucial factors in Somali culture and relations, we should not read Somali society solely in their context. To complete the sociopolitical framework it is necessary to represent, via literature, yet another aspect of the social dichotomy operated under colonial influence and

¹⁷ For a description of Somali poetry and prose, see AHAD, ALI MUMIN (2002), *Dall'oralità alla scrittura, prospettive nuove per la letteratura somala. Gli scrittori dalla diaspora*, a cura di Armando Gnisci, Nora Moll, Roma, Edizioni Interculturali, pp. 112-113.

formalized by the dominant political culture of the time. Of this facet Farah offers, at best, a fleeting apparition, a background or an estranged presence in his plots; a subject without a means for self-representation.

3. 4. *The Influences of Pastoral Culture on the Contemporary Somalian Diaspora*

In *Sardines*, Farah conveys the bleak atmosphere that characterizes and, in the wake of the civil war, still persecutes the Somalian diaspora wherever they may find themselves in the world. In a dialogue within Nasser and Dulman he asks: «Mi spieghi perché i somali vivono in miseria all'estero, specialmente là dove formano le comunità più numerose? E perché si odiano al punto di evitarsi?» (p. 185). Farah attributes some of the greatest hardships Somalis face to the adaptation of a nomadic nature, forged in pastoral living conditions, to an urban sedentary lifestyle. The author writes of the inconclusive loquacity of a person who does not measure time nor physical mobility like the pastoral, nomadic society, perpetually in movement and travelling from one city to the next without ever settling down.

Akin to Somalis living at home, the only fixed connections are those of the family and the clan among fellow Somalis. The rejection of a sedentary existence is no doubt a feature of nomadic populations whose freedom may be likened to that of flocks of migrating birds. Raised in a collective society based on belonging, the Somali is unable to live in isolation. Banished in this collective condition, Somalis finally find themselves lacking a space for individual reflection. The reality of the 1970s and 1980s Farah tragically depicts in the novel *Sardines* is nonetheless an improvement on the reality of Somalia following the civil war (1991-) and the disappearance of the Somalian State at an institutional level.¹⁸

The growing numbers of Somalis in the contemporary diaspora living in countries and in societies culturally different from their own has led to their self-interrogation as they finally begin to question their past, future and actual cultural identity. Farah condenses this tragedy and trauma inflicted by such interrogation in his aforementioned reportage on the Somalian diaspora.¹⁹

¹⁸ «At the end of 2001 there were an estimated 300,000 Somalis seeking refuge or asylum in other countries. Of those, it was estimated that 160,000 were in Kenya, 67,000 in Yemen, 30,000 in Ethiopia and 20,000 in Djibouti, with smaller numbers of Somali refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa, Egypt, Tanzania, Libya, Uganda, Eritrea and Zambia, and in the USA and various European States. Approximately 400,000 Somalis were internally displaced at that time. In 2000 the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees repatriated 43,467 refugees to north-western Somalia, bringing the number of Somali returnees since 1997 to 125,572», in *Africa South of the Sahara 2003*, ed. Katharine Murison, 32nd ed., London, Europa Publications, Taylor and Francis Group, 2002, p. 945.

¹⁹ «Il pregio e la fortuna di Nuruddin è quello d'aver saputo portare al di fuori dei confini fisici e culturali somali, la descrizione, seppure parziale, della società somala. Parziale non perché egli osteggia per una parte, ma esprime quella cultura che ha la sua origine dalla società nomade e poco da quella sedentaria ed agricola. Pure questo è un aspetto importante, per comprendere la realtà somala

New writers within the Somalian diaspora, particularly those in Italy starting to write in Italian, are in the minority, as stated in our introduction, and are relatively unknown. They write, for the most part, of memories and nostalgia for Somalia. Cristina Ali Farah is representative of Somali writers belonging to a new generation of the diaspora that writes about the country of their adolescence since they have lived in Italy for a significant period of time. They narrate with candour the link with their cherished yet unfamiliar homeland which is idealized and, often, poetic. With this simultaneously poetic and nostalgic approach, many of them will succeed in developing understanding of the complex reality of Somalia. The most determined of these writers might examine the history of the country with a clearer lens and then replace folkloristic images of Somalia with a cultural patrimony capable of dialogue with other cultures. This exchange would be timely in Italy, a country that has had more influence than any other on Somalian culture, and would enable an unprecedented reciprocity between two cultures.

e che l'autore sorvola o ne fa appena un fuggevole cenno nella trilogia. Queste 'assenze' hanno un loro preciso significato e che solo un somalo è in grado di percepire. Non dicono nulla al lettore inglese o italiano così come al critico. Sono proprio queste lacune, ai miei occhi ed alla mia percezione della complessa società somala, ciò che fa dell'opera dell'autore Nuruddin Farah, uno specifico punto di vista, una rappresentazione di parte e non un quadro analiticamente oggettivo della realtà sociale e del potere in Somalia. Ciò non toglie che egli sia un artista di notevole capacità artistica e un letterato di «spessore internazionale». AHAD, ALI MUMIN, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

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