



<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: Postcolonial Abjections: Physical and Moral Corruption in *Rhoda* by Igiaba Scego

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 3 (2016)

Author: Jessica Sciubba

Publication date: December 2016

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Open Contributions”

Permalink: <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/14-postcolonial-abjections-physical-and-moral-corruption-in-rhoda-by-igiaba-scego/>

Author Bio: Jessica Sciubba is a Ph.D. candidate in Italian Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her dissertation “Paradigms of Refuse: Waste, Abjection, and Rejection in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema” looks at Italy and the Mediterranean as liminal spaces, landscapes of crisis where socio-environmental emergencies and geopolitical turmoil converge. Her research interests include Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema, Migration Studies, Post-Colonial Italy, Ecocriticism, Gender and Women’s Studies.

Abstract: This article explores the trajectories of moral and bodily abjection in *Rhoda* by Igiaba Scego. Drawing principally on Judith Butler’s theory of social abjection and on her critique of the heteronormative discourse, this article identifies the importance of the heteronormative imperative in the shaping of gender roles and points at the abject status acquired by those identities that do not conform to this norm. The complexity of Rhoda’s relationship with her body and with her sexuality represents a key point in the further developments of her abjectifying trajectory; the self-imposed denial of her homosexuality indeed drags her into a self-destructive spiral that leads to a progressive deterioration of her body via prostitution, illness and ultimately death. The article outlines the various configurations of abjection located at the intersections of gender, sexuality, colonialism, religion, and racialization within the novel and highlights the transformative as well as the paradoxical potential embedded within them. The ultimate aim is to trace the subversive trajectory of Rhoda’s efforts to reclaim her body, and, with it, a degree of agency.

Copyright information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Postcolonial Abjections: Physical and Moral Corruption in *Rhoda* by Igiaba Scego

JESSICA SCIUBBA

In the closing paragraphs of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak discusses how the body of the female subaltern can potentially become the ultimate site for self-expression through the subversive embrace of abject practices.¹ Suicidal resistance, in particular, can represent the extreme attempt to inscribe an interventionist message on the materiality of the woman’s body. The debut novel of the Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego *Rhoda* (2004) seems to grasp Spivak’s provocative perspective by locating the protagonist of the title in a similar subversive parable that, paradoxically, will grant her the ultimate degree of self-expression through abjection and martyrdom.

The novel, a fragmented, polyphonic narration told by many voices, presents a narration wrought with the overall laceration of the woman’s body. It is the story of one woman, one body and the endless labels attached to her: Rhoda the prostitute, the sister, the saint, the sinner, the Muslim, the lesbian. The protagonist is suspended in the liminal condition of her displaced identity, in her circular meandering between Mogadishu, Rome, London, Rome, Naples and, again, Mogadishu. After the loss of their parents, at the outbreak of the Somalian civil war in 1991, Rhoda and her younger sister Aisha move to Rome where their aunt Barni takes care of them. Rhoda is the emblem of the Somali woman caught between tradition and the desire for a higher degree of agency, at the same time fighting for and against the pressure of religious and cultural norms. Her body becomes the token of her cultural heritage; it is materially marked through the practice of infibulation that is perceived by Rhoda as a negation of her own sexuality. Furthermore, her unexpected affection for an older woman, Gianna, results in an unforeseen and inconceivable turn, representing a threat to the dogma of heteronormativity to which Rhoda feels the need to comply. The urge to suppress her “unacceptable” sexual drive drags her into a self-destructive spiral that leads to a progressive deterioration of her body via prostitution, illness and ultimately death.

Drawing principally on Judith Butler’s theory of social abjection and on her critique of heteronormative discourse, this essay explores Igiaba Scego’s *Rhoda* by identifying the importance of the heteronormative imperative in the shaping of gender roles and by highlighting the abject status acquired by those identities that do not conform to this norm and which are consequently acknowledged as ontological impossibilities. In doing so, the essay addresses how these issues intersect and are affected by the postcolonial dimension in which they are inscribed. The complexity of Rhoda’s relationship with her body and with her sexuality represents a key point in the further developments of her abjectifying trajectory; the self-imposed denial of her homosexuality indeed is one of the main factors at the core of her passive surrender to a supposedly predetermined destiny.

The category of abjection presents in itself a destabilizing potential at multiple levels. According to Julia Kristeva’s theorization, the abject describes those aspects of the bodily experiences that perturb the integrity of the body.² Abjection is that which blurs the dividing line between life and death, the inside and the outside of the body, the self and the other. Martin Jay, in

¹ In her essay, Spivak ultimately suggests that the female subaltern’s attempt to use the body as an instrument of resistance and as a way to claim a certain degree of agency is doomed to fail. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can The Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

² Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

discussing Kristeva's notion of abjection, depicts the abject as having both a biological and a cultural dimension, representing anything "that threatens rigid boundaries and evokes powerful fears of filth, pollution, contamination, and defilement."³ Not only can this category be used to approach social phenomena of exclusion and rejection, but it can also become a powerful tool to explore these social and cultural inscriptions on the surface of the human (gendered) body.

In what follows I will outline the various configurations of abjection located at the intersections of gender, sexuality, colonialism, religion, racialization, and migration within the novel in order to highlight the transformative as well as the paradoxical potential embedded within them. The aim is to trace the subversive trajectory of Rhoda's efforts to reclaim her body, and, with it, a degree of agency. Torn by the unbearable burden of social pretensions and expectations, Rhoda's body is exhausted and literally dismembered: "Ognuno mi voleva a immagine e somiglianza di qualcosa che di fatto non potevo essere io. Anche le persone che mi volevano bene non sfuggivano a questa logica perversa. Tutti volevano un pezzettino di me, era estenuante."⁴ It is the weight of familiar, social and cultural constrictions that distresses her, causing an irreverent and subversive reaction that will lead to her tragic but self-asserting fate.

The novel will also serve as a starting point to explore the abjectifying rhetoric to which the postcolonial female body is exposed being perceived as inherently impure by both the colonial apparatus, and its obsession with race contamination, and by the patriarchal society of belonging. Through the controversial practice of Female Genital Cutting, for instance, rooted in religious and popular beliefs and anchored to essentialized patriarchal paradigms of gender roles' construction, the infibulated body becomes the emblem of a perturbing otherness that at the same time repels and attracts and is thus unavoidably abjectified by the Western reifying gaze. On the one hand, this body can be perceived as an abnormal, repugnant deformation, therefore becoming the stigma of an irreducible, primordial alterity. On the other hand, the same body, with its staggering potential and its exotic, ancestral allure can ignite primitive and unspeakable fantasies in the eyes of the European "pioneer," evoking colonial reminiscences of unexplored lands and bodies to be possessed and subjugated.

Echoes of Italy's Colonial legacy

The body of the postcolonial subject and, in particular, the female body, represents the site of multidirectional struggles where issues of gender, sexuality, race, and agency intersect, undermining the configuration of the self in terms of both identity and belonging. In the context of diaspora, these bodies are constructed as "strange bodies," to borrow Sara Ahmed's terms, being perceived as inherently abject and unassimilable; they are the "effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities;"⁵ in other words, the perception of their essential alterity is filtered through "histories of determination"⁶ that acknowledge them as a threat to the integrity of the community associating them with filth, defilement, and contamination.

³ Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of our Time*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 146.

⁴ Igiaba Scego, *Rhoda*, (Roma: Sinnos Editrice, 2010, Nook edition), section 4, Rhoda. "Everyone wanted me in the image and likeness of something that actually could not be me. Even people who loved me did not escape this twisted logic. Everyone wanted a piece of me, it was exhausting." All translations are my own.

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

Before delving into the details of Rhoda's abjectifying parable, it is important to briefly contextualize the (post)colonial elements scattered throughout the novel, with reference to the Italian colonial rhetoric, in order to provide a better understanding of the issues of exoticization, power relations, and contamination later explored in my analysis. Traces of the Italian colonial past and the reference to the former colonial presence in Somalia are a recurrent feature throughout *Rhoda's* narrative fabric. Barni's reminiscences of colonial memories, for instance, represent moments of recollection of a neglected past. Born in Somalia under Italian colonial rule, she received an Italian education to the diminishment of her own culture: "Quando era piccola sapeva tutto di Garibaldi, Mazzini, Cavour, re Vittorio Emanuele II, ma non sapeva assolutamente nulla dei suoi eroi nazionali, non sapeva nulla dei darawish, del Saydka, di Ahmed Gurey."⁷ Thanks to her study of literature and language, Barni could speak polished Italian, but once in Italy "lo aveva rinnegato, semplicemente. 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."⁸ The legacy of the colonial past that surfaces in the narration, through the accounts of direct witnesses such as Barni, reveals the persistence in the social and public spheres of postcolonial Italy of a binary framework in relation to issues of race and cultural subordination.

The novel is characterized by constant reference to the categories of race, gender, sexuality, and religion that unavoidably intersect, dialoguing with each other and establishing a breeding ground for further considerations on representations of race and blackness.⁹ Relics of the eroticized image of the colonial Black Venus, with her exotic sexuality, echo the ways in which Rhoda is perceived by Italian society.¹⁰ The colonial rhetoric, indeed, exemplified the representation of the indigenous woman as *Venere nera*; Sandra Ponzanesi remarks how this image

became a forceful trope for expressing the contaminated and yet highly asymmetrical relationship between the ruler and the ruled. It allegorically rendered and vindicated the position of the white male colonizers expanding their authority and property over the virgin soil of the imperial territory, of which the black Venus is the quintessential emblem of the other, both in racial and in sexual terms.¹¹

With her primordially abject alterity, the Black Venus embodies at once unutterable desires, sexual fantasies and "primordial fear[s] of the Other."¹² In this perspective, despite being inscribed in the Italian social fabric through a process of cultural assimilation, Rhoda is ultimately cast out of it by

⁷ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 4. Faduma&Barni. "When she was little she knew everything about Garibaldi, Mazzini, Cavour, Victor Emmanuel II, but she knew absolutely nothing of her national heroes, she knew nothing of Darawish, the Saydka, Ahmed Gurey."

⁸ Ibid. "she had simply repudiated it. By dint of being told 'you Negroes don't know Italian!' Barni had come to believe it. [...] She eventually became the stereotype of the immigrant woman that society (or media) wanted to see in her."

⁹ See Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, "Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy," in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13.

¹⁰ See Rosetta Giuliani Caponetto, "Blaxploitation Italian Style: Exhuming and Consuming the Colonial Black Venus in 1970's Cinema in Italy," in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 191.

¹¹ Sandra Ponzanesi, "Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices," in *Italian Colonialism. Legacies and Memories*, ed. Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), 166.

¹² Ibid., 176.

virtue of her skin color, which is perceived as an unavoidable mark of otherness, as a synonym of moral perdition and physical abnormality.

It is exactly in response to the fear of sexual contamination and the consequent physical and moral degradation of the ‘razza italica,’ that Fascist Italy promulgated racial laws against interracial unions between colonizers and colonized. Biological and cultural assumptions of superiority, based on eugenic studies, were also at the core of fascist obsessions with physical as well as social hygiene: the body of the individual was hence located outside of the natural and private spheres and relocated within the public dimension of the nation;¹³ in this light, hygienic, medicalization and surveillance practices in the colonial context “implicarono la stigmatizzazione della nerezza, associata all’impurità, alla sporcizia, alla malattia ed al contagio.”¹⁴ These mechanisms are at the core of the racialization process that lead to the construction of Italy’s identity as inherently white and to the perception of blackness as a site of abjection and contamination. References to this rhetoric and to the fear of contagion via sexual contact with the infected other are at the core of the novel and will be addressed in detail presently.

From the denial of homosexuality to self-annihilation

Rhoda’s attitude towards her sexuality is conflicted; unwittingly locating herself beyond the dichotomous representation of gender, she disrupts the “compulsory order sex/gender/desire”¹⁵ imposed by institutionalized heterosexuality. Her “incoherent desire” is manifested in her obsession to possess Gianna’s sinuous body: “In sogno vedevo il suo seno prosperoso, il suo sedere rotondo, la sua forma sinuosa. Era sensualissima, io volevo possederla, farla mia per sempre. Ma l’idea di possedere era molto diversa da quella dei signori uomini. Io volevo fondermi con lei, volevo un pezzetto di lei, volevo diventare lei.”¹⁶ However, the question is further problematized by Rhoda’s refusal to acknowledge her homosexuality and by her embrace of heterosexual normativity as the only possible natural paradigm.

As argued by Judith Butler, under the bulwark of the dichotomous imperative of heterosexuality only certain gender identities are recognized, acknowledged and legitimized.¹⁷ These “intelligible” genders are the ones that “maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire.”¹⁸ The heterosexualization of desire is at the basis of this presupposed intelligibility and, in this light, gender identities that do not conform to these hegemonic cultural norms are perceived as logical impossibilities. The experience of homosexual desire is, therefore, considered unacceptable in the essential binary opposition that regulates gender identities; Rhoda is trapped in a state of suspended and denied in-betweenness, blurring the “disjunctive axis of the feminine/masculine”¹⁹ that is hence destined to fail. As Butler contends, heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual practices are intrinsically characterized by suppressed ambiguities and incoherencies, and this repression is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to

¹³ Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero: Storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani* (Firenze: Le Monnier Università, 2013), 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 9.

¹⁶ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 3, Rhoda. “In my dreams I saw her breasts, her round butt, her sinuous form. She was very sensual, I wanted to possess her, make her mine forever. But the idea of possessing her was very different from that of the gentlemen. I wanted to merge with her, I wanted a piece of her, I wanted to become her.”

¹⁷ Butler, *Gender*, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

maintain the asymmetrical binary masculine/feminine and a reified unity of gender through compulsory heterosexuality.²⁰

What emerges from Rhoda's struggle with her own sexuality is the self-denial of a supposed "incoherent" desire; this negation inscribes itself into the paradigm of heterosexist oppression in response to the atavic taboo on homosexuality:

Non volevo pronunciare la parola che mi faceva più paura di tutte, ma quella parola aleggiava nell'aria, mi minacciava.
LESBICA.
Odiavo quella parola. Io non ero così. Il mio amore era puro mi dicevo.
Io non amo le donne, dicevo a me stessa, io amo solo lei.²¹

But the nature of Rhoda's feelings towards Gianna is still more complex than this quotation suggests. In fact, her bond with the mature woman is not driven by a merely physical or sexual attraction, but also by her desire to recover the dream of a lost childhood. Gianna comes to personify the maternal figure she lost during her childhood, and her attachment shows signs of childlike obsessions and infantile dependencies: "Quando guardavamo un film a casa sua, mi accoccolavo ai suoi piedi e la stringevo forte al mio seno. Ero affettuosa con lei, ero mansueta con lei," and further, "Cominciasti quasi da subito a vestirmi, comportarmi e perfino muovermi come Gianna."²² Rhoda's relationship with the maternal figure is intricate; after the early death of her biological mother, she moves to Italy where she is welcomed and raised by her aunt Barni who inevitably becomes a maternal figure. Barni, however, is not able to fulfill the emptiness caused by Rhoda's loss of her mother. In fact, she will never be perceived as a model upon which Rhoda can shape her femininity. The encounter with Gianna, on the contrary, satisfies this need; the woman is immediately acknowledged as a suitable replacement for the missing mother figure. Her charm and femininity seduce the young Rhoda, and she comes to embody what Kristeva defines as the "forbidden mother, primordial seducer, limit of an archaic, infantile jouissance that must never be reproduced."²³

Rhoda convinces herself of the innocent and pure nature of her attraction to Gianna, observing that: "Io dicevo a me stessa di aver trovato una nuova mamma, una figura femminile di riferimento."²⁴ Yet, by projecting a displaced libidinal maternal dependency, she enacts a symbolic incest that will lead to an immediate and abrupt rejection from Gianna. It is indeed when Rhoda calls her *mamma*, during a moment of intimacy, giving voice to this unspeakable connection, that Gianna, suddenly ashamed, rejects their sexual relationship:

Fu un bacio violento. Ero robusta e la trattenni a forza sul divano. [...] Fu allora che mi spinsi oltre. Presi in bocca il suo seno sinistro e cominciai a mimare un bambino che succhia il latte materno. [...]

²⁰ Ibid., 31.

²¹ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 3, Rhoda. "I didn't want to say the word that scared me more than anyone else, but that word lingered in the air, threatening me./LESBIAN./I hated that word. I was not so. My love was pure I told myself./I do not love women, I said to myself, I love only her."

²² Ibid. "When we were watching a movie at her place, I used to nestle against her feet and held her tightly to my breast. I was affectionate with her, I was gentle with her"; "almost immediately I began to dress, behave and even move as Gianna."

²³ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 245.

²⁴ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 3, Rhoda. "I used to tell myself that I had found a new mother, a female figure of reference."

Sussurrai piano la parola ‘mamma.’ Quello fu un errore, lei la sentì e mi scaraventò con tutta la sua forza da vecchia lontano.²⁵

The word mother carries in itself the unbearable burden of the primordial taboo that prohibits incestuous desire; this unavoidable ban, added to the already problematic homoeroticism, represents a point of no return, declaring the final and irrevocable impossibility for this relation to exist. As Butler observes:

The taboo against incest and, implicitly, against homosexuality is a repressive injunction which presumes an original desire localized in the notion of “dispositions,” which suffers a repression of an originally homosexual libidinal directionality and produces the displaced phenomenon of heterosexual desire.²⁶

The prohibition of homosexual incest is established by heteronormativity, and, at the same time, it generates the compelled heterosexual identity through an abiding denial. The subject undergoes a coerced libidinal detachment that is necessary for the further reattachment and re-inscription in the paradigm of heterosexuality. This heterosexual refusal to acknowledge the primary homosexual attachment is culturally enforced by a prohibition on homosexuality; lesbian sexuality becomes inherently unintelligible as a result of the inscription of the paternal-repressive law that sanctions the speakable from the unspeakable, the legitimate from the illegitimate.²⁷

According to Kristeva, “the homosexual maternal facet is a whirl of words, a complete absence of meaning and seeing; it is feeling displacement, rhythm, sound, flashes and fantasied clinging to maternal body as a screen against the plunge.”²⁸ In this perspective, female homosexuality implies “the emergence of psychosis into culture”²⁹ representing an infraction of the incest taboo, where it is recognized as an unintelligible practice that undermines motherhood, and therefore provides the ultimate defense against libidinal chaos. Conversely, in Rhoda’s case, it is exactly this prohibition, this self-denial of the homosexual drive that generates her further self-annihilation through the objectification of her body. As a reaction to her intrinsic phobia of being acknowledged as a lesbian, Rhoda imposes on herself, both physically and emotionally, a counterfeit sense of gender identity and pushes it to its extreme configurations, in the attempt of gaining control over her body and, most of all, her sexuality.

The emergence of the word “lesbian” creates the *dispositif*, the apparatus that holds together a series of existing identities and that inevitably provokes feelings of anxiety and repulsion.

Non so che cosa mi era preso, ma non riescivo a fermarmi. Sapevo che quello che stavo facendo con quella donna era una cosa sporca, da *nijaas*,³⁰ ma non riescivo a fermarmi. “Rivestiti”, gridò. “Mi fai schifo, mi fai schifo.”

²⁵ Ibid. “It was a violent kiss. I was strong and I forced her on the sofa. [...] It was then that I went even further. I took her left breast in my mouth and began to mimic a baby sucking mother’s milk. [...] I whispered the word ‘mom’. That was a mistake, she heard it and pushed me away with all the strength of an old woman.”

²⁶ Butler, *Gender*, 65.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kristeva, *Desire*, 239-40.

²⁹ Butler, *Gender*, 85.

³⁰ Somali word for “impure” repeatedly used by the author throughout the novel and extremely powerful to convey the idea of filth, dirt and pollution associated with Rhoda’s life.

“Ma come... sembrava...” “Non sembrava niente... non sono lesbica io... non sono lesbica come te! Mi fai schifo, capito? Schifo!! Rivestiti.” Ero atterrita. La parola di cui avevo tanta paura era stata pronunciata. Possibile che io fossi quella cosa lì? Ma io non amavo le donne.³¹

By drawing on the Foucauldian concept of *dispositif*, Agamben’s *dispositivo*, or apparatus, implies a process of subjectification by which the subject is ultimately constructed through the apparatus’ capacity of orienting, modeling and categorizing behaviors or inclinations.³² It is through the act of calling, of pronouncing a word out loud that behaviors and categories crystallize into identity. Thus, Rhoda’s acknowledgment as a lesbian inscribes her into a fixed representation of her own subjectivity that captures the spectrum of her identity refractions into a monolithic label.

Moreover, it is important to point out that, while part of the mainstream LGBTQ debate would trace back Rhoda’s inability to accept her homosexuality to her religious and cultural identity as a Muslim, on the basis of a supposed incompatibility between Islam and homosexuality, her embrace of heteronormativity must be understood as the result of a complex matrix of social and cultural constraints in both Italy and Somalia. In the introduction to the volume *Islam and Homosexuality*, Samar Habib argues that “Islam is neither condemnatory nor forgiving, neither restrictive nor liberationist [and] that Islam as in any other religion, is shaped by the cultures that adopt it, by the socioeconomic, geographic, and political states of such cultures.”³³ The binary model that sees the West as a place of liberation in opposition to the Middle East, and Islam in particular, as the breeding ground of persecution and homophobia reproduces the reified logic of the Orientalist discourse, sanctioning the Muslim queer as an ontological contradiction.³⁴ In Rhoda’s case, her inability to acknowledge her queer identity is shaped by both cultural contexts of reference, each anchored to essentializing patriarchal, heteronormative, paradigms.³⁵

The abject turn: towards the physical and moral corruption

³¹ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 3, Rhoda. “I don’t know what had happened to me, but I couldn’t stop. I knew what I was doing with that woman was a dirty thing, that *nijaas* would do, but I couldn’t stop./‘Get dressed’ she cried. ‘You disgust me, you disgust me.’/‘But...it seemed like...’/‘It didn’t seem like anything...I’m not a lesbian...I’m not a lesbian like you! You disgust me, understood? Disgust! Get dressed.’/I was terrified. The word that scared me so much had been pronounced. Was it possible that I was like that? But I did not love women.”

³² See Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Padatella, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

³³ Samar Habib, “Introduction,” in *Islam and Homosexuality*, ed. Samar Habib (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), xl.

³⁴ Ayisha A. Al-Sayyad, “You’re What?: Engaging Narratives from Diasporic Muslim Women on Identity and Gay Liberation,” in Vol 2. of *Islam and Homosexuality*, ed. Samar Habib (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010) 377.

³⁵ In recent years, Italy has been the arena of a media onslaught of the so called “no-gender” campaign started in 2013 as the expression of the bigot conservatism of both political and religious actors that see in the theory of gender an aberrant threat to a supposedly immutable institution of the traditional family. Furthermore, Italy is far behind concerning important issues such as the recognition of LGBTQ rights or the fight against homophobia thus validating its peripheral positioning at the southern edge of the Europe not only geographically but also with reference to its sexual politics. For a deeper understanding of the no-gender movement and of Italy’s marginal see Giovanni Dall’Orto, “I turbamenti del giovane Gender,” *Hermes. Journal of Communication* 7 (2016): 33-60, accessed September 24, 2016. <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/h-ermes/article/viewFile/15977/13822>; Gianmaria Colpani and Adriano Jose Hated, “In Europe It’s Different?: Homonationalism and Peripheral Desires for Europe,” in *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe a Rainbow Europe?*, ed. Phillip M. Ayoub and David Paternotte (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 73-93.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler argues that the construction of modern subjectivity inevitably produces a domain of abject beings condemned to live “unlivable lives.”³⁶ Furthermore, Butler underlines how the fear of being confined to this abject realm can incite those at the end of social hierarchies of class, race, and sexuality to embrace normalizing practices so as not to be associated with the abject.³⁷ In order to survive abjection, the marginalized categories that are not able to reinscribe themselves in the domain of subjecthood (the sexual deviants, the colonized, the racialized, the migrant) are confined to the fringes and are forced to produce alternative social and cultural forms through subversive—and at times repulsive—strategies. In this perspective, Rhoda’s regressing path can be seen as an attempt to produce an alternative agency through the subversive embrace of abjection as a paradoxically empowering instrument.

The abrupt transition from virginity to sexual perversion through prostitution must not be interpreted merely as a victimization of the foreign woman’s body ascribable to a supposed lack of agency and self-determination. As Luca Trappolin argues, foreign women are assumed to belong to a culture “Other” than the Western, and their sexuality is inherently perceived as “less-civilized.”³⁸ It is through their victimization that the binary opposition between “us” and “them” is maintained and continuously reinstated. This “process of ‘complexity reduction,’” that labels the foreign prostitute (as opposed to the Italian) as a passive victim lacking of free will and agency, permeates the Italian public opinion at various levels from mass media to the political discourse.³⁹ Rhoda’s path of physical and moral corruption is the result of a choice, although a debasing and extreme one, unconsciously driven by the necessity to conform her sexuality to the hegemonic paradigm of heteronormativity. Yet, the woman is lucidly aware of the essentializing commonplace that penetrates the Italian collective imagery and almost inevitably labels black women as prostitutes:

Una donna nera in Italia aveva, nell’immaginario comune, delle collocazioni precise. Si andava dal top ai bassi fondi più tetri. [...] Nei casi peggiori si era delle donne perdute, femmine avidi di soldi e disposte a vendersi per pochi luridi spiccioli. In quanto donna nera mi sentivo etichettata. Non avevo scampo, il luogo comune si sarebbe nutrito delle mie povere membra e mi avrebbe digerito senza complimenti.⁴⁰

This consciousness, together with the intrinsic sense of guilt for her “impure” libidinal compulsions, leads Rhoda to deliberately embark on this abjectifying path: “Fu così che decisi di arrendermi al luogo comune. Mi appiccicai da sola un’etichetta (non volevo che lo facessero gli altri per me) e mi persi.”⁴¹ What remains unsaid, inexpressible, unacceptable and which therefore must be repressed in Rhoda’s struggle with her own sexuality prevents her from emerging as a subject; confronted by her lack of subjectivity, Rhoda enters the domain of abjection through prostitution. Her acceptance of the abject perspective through her deliberate choice of becoming a prostitute opens the way to

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Luca Trappolin, “Gender Victims and Cultural Borders: The Globalization of Prostitution in Italy,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 29, no. 3/4 (2005): 341.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 4, Rhoda. “A black woman in Italy had, in the popular imagination, precise locations. From the top to the darkest slums. [...] In the worst cases she was a lost woman, eager for money and willing to sell herself for a few dirty pennies. As a black woman I was labeled. I had no way out, the cliché would have fed itself of my poor body and it would have digested me without compliments.”

⁴¹ Ibid. “So, I decided to surrender to the cliché. I attached to myself a label (I didn’t want other people to do it for me) and I got lost.”

further layers of moral and bodily corruption: by transgressing Islamic practices and precepts and by entering into physical contact with the contaminated *gaal*⁴² (unbeliever), Rhoda contracts HIV and is thus exposed to multiple degrees of bodily abjection and of social rejection by the Somali-Muslim community. Depriving herself of subjectivity through an act of conscious surrender, Rhoda's body is invested by a series of abominable, perverse and sacrilegious significations that confine her to the realm of abjection, provoking both attraction and repulsion in the eyes of the society around her.

Rhoda's attempt to reestablish her heterosexuality is masochistic; the sacrifice of her virginity, for the sake of heteronormativity, takes place at the hand of an elderly Italian man who caught her spying on Gianna. Compelled by guilt, Rhoda turns self-denial into pure, prophetic martyrdom. Her sexual surrender does not involve a recognition of dignity in her male client; rather, it is conceived as acceptance of the brutal violation of the body that sanctions her irreversible "dishonor." Behind the facade of prostitution, rape is often misconceived as a consensual intercourse,⁴³ where the client feels legitimized to perpetrate violence in a delirium of omnipotence and where the alleged gender subordination is inherently sexualized: "Fu un rapporto sessuale quasi violento. [...] A pensarci ora fu quasi come una violenza sessuale. Inoltre a complicare le cose c'era la mia infibulazione."⁴⁴ Rhoda's sexuality is further challenged and problematized by the infibulation performed on her when she was a child. Her body is "split," characterized by antithetical significations: on one side, it is men's instrument to achieve pleasure and establish superiority and command; on the other, it acquires, for Rhoda, the traits of a prison, carrying the scars of a denied sexuality of which she has been permanently deprived both physically and psychologically.

On the reification of infibulated bodies: the debate on FGC

In Igiaba Scego's writings, from *Rhoda* to *Oltre Babilonia* and her latest novel *Adua*, female genital cutting⁴⁵ (FGC),⁴⁶ infibulation, in particular, represents a recurring and pressing issue, embodying the emblem of female abjectification, hovering over the threshold between allure and disgust. It appears therefore unavoidable to problematize and reflect on the practice of infibulation perceived by Scego,

⁴² The term *gaal* refers to all white men in Somali language.

⁴³ For further insights see Barbara Sullivan, "Rape, Prostitution and Consent," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 40, no. 2, (2007): 127-42.

⁴⁴ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 4, Rhoda. "It was almost a violent sexual intercourse. [...] On second thoughts it was almost a rape. Moreover, to complicate things there was my infibulation."

⁴⁵ The debate over the issue extends also to the terminology used to refer to the practice. Here I choose the term Female Genital Cutting because I perceive it as more objective and precise and above all because it is without the value-laden meanings and implications that characterize terms such as Female Genital Mutilations (used by many Western feminists as well as health organizations, and rejected as offensive, reifying), or Female Circumcision (which is instead perceived as reductive since it associates the practice to male circumcision which is less invasive). For further insights on the issue see Mary Nyangweso, *Female Circumcision: The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007).

⁴⁶ According to the World Health Organization's definition, FGC refers to several distinctive practices, comprising "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons" in *Female Genital Mutilation: A Joint WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA Statement* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1997), 3. As described on the WHO website, these procedures include clitoridectomy, the "partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce", excision the "partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora," and infibulation or "pharaonic circumcision" consisting in the "narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris." "Classification of female genital mutilation," WHO, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/overview/en/>.

in line with scholars such as Nawāl Sa'dāwī as a denying act of the right to bodily integrity.⁴⁷ Traditionally intended as a “para-hygienic” practice,⁴⁸ FGC can be acknowledged as a double layered action, “inscribed in body practice and moral form [...] when Somali girls are circumcised, the ‘male’—and thus ‘unclean’—parts are removed from the female body, while simultaneously a male image is bodily inscribed through the infibulation scar in the form of a fake penis.”⁴⁹ In this tradition, infibulation represents a cultural mark aimed at humanizing the irrational animality embedded in the excised parts; by securing the woman’s moral integrity, her “stitched” body (she uses the word “cucita”) becomes the emblem of the family’s honorability.

Far from any voyeuristic, essentializing, or even interventionist aim, this excursus on the issue of infibulation constitutes an indispensable step in the attempt to depict the plurality of meanings, legacies, and representations that characterize the bodies of postcolonial subjects in the context of diaspora, through the fictional filter of Scego’s female protagonist.⁵⁰ As Sandra Ponzanesi remarks, in order to constructively engage with such a complex and controversial debate, it is important to understand how “the discursive strategies within which infibulation has come to exist in Africa are different from the discursive strategies which condemn it in the Western countries.”⁵¹ Indeed, although it is fundamental to rethink and to question the ongoing persistence of this practice, residues of the colonial discourse are still discernible in the Western rhetoric of infibulation and female genital cutting in general. From the perspective of many African scholars, the encounter between Europe and Africa, in fact, maintains an essential asymmetry; as Ajayi-Soyinka points out

[it] does not take place under a normal acculturation process in which there is a mutual exchange and acknowledgment of ideas. [...] Both the colonized and the colonizer emerge from two patriarchal systems, one seeking to dominate and the other fighting against domination. Thus, during anticolonial struggles, women are invariably reconstructed as the battle bodies upon which the power contests are fought out.⁵²

⁴⁷ See Nawāl Sa'dāwī, “Imperialism and Sex in Africa,” in *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 21-26.

⁴⁸ FGC is often justified in religious terms by referring to the hadith of Umm Attya; this hadith, which is not mentioned in the most authentic and authoritative hadith’s collection by Muhammad al-Bukhari, is extremely controversial since the many variations of the story provide different interpretations of the practice. As reported by Noor Kassamali in these versions, Prophet Muhammad “is alleged to have said, ‘Reduce but do not destroy; this is enjoyable to the woman and is preferable to the man.’ [While] another version of the same hadith says ‘Do not go in deep. It is more illuminating to the face and more enjoyable to the husband’” in Noor J. Kassamali, “When Modernity Confronts Traditional Practices: Female Genital Cutting in Northeast Africa,” in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity*, ed. Herbert L. Bodman and Nayyirah Tawhīdī (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998) 44. Many scholars have indeed argued that, given the absence of Qur’anic references to FGC, this hadith is too tenuous and does not provide enough evidence to sanction the practice as Islamic.

⁴⁹ Aud Talle, “Female Circumcision in Africa and Beyond,” in *Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context*, ed. Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Ducan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 91-92.

⁵⁰ For an in-depth analysis of Western “voyeuristic” approaches to the issue of infibulation and female circumcision see Sara Johnsdotter, “Persistence of Tradition or Reassessment of Cultural Practices in Exile?,” in *Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context*, ed. Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Ducan, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 107-134.

⁵¹ Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 188.

⁵² Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, “Transcending the Boundaries of Power and Imperialism: Writing Gender, Constructing Knowledge,” in *Female Circumcision and The Politics of Knowledge: African Women In Imperialist Discourses*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 61.

Along these lines, the discourse over FGC has been exploited by a good portion of Western feminists and mass media perpetrating the objectification of African women. It is precisely in the light of such reifying discourses that the displacement of circumcised bodies caused by exile and diaspora involves a reenactment of a traumatic experience: the infibulated woman is summoned to face the objectifying gazes of both the media and the public opinion through which her scars are revived time after time. Once again, the body of the African woman is charged with significations that transcend its physicality and testify an inherent alterity; it is on the scars of this “strange body” that the woman’s reification takes place, this time at the hand of the Western objectifying rhetoric. Infibulation carries in itself the label of an inexorable Otherness; and this anomaly, at times, raises unspeakable perversions in the male sexual imagery, evoking a primitive, unexplored land to be conquered by the European pioneer. The woman’s body is thus exoticized, invested with a primordial, ancestral allure. Rhoda’s body, for instance, is transformed into an empty vessel to be breached, defiled and corrupted by the man’s exoticizing gaze, enacting the same estranging and essentializing logic at the basis of the Orientalist discourse where “the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe”.⁵³ “Quando gli spiegai che ero vergine e ‘cucita’ lui si eccitò ancora di più. Quella novità inaspettata lo stava galvanizzando.”⁵⁴ As a result of the diasporic fluxes of people, cultures and bodies across borders, Otherness transcends the geographical frontiers of the faraway “Orient” and is reinscribed in the European context. Rhoda’s body blurs the line between “here” and “there,” locating itself in a suspended dimension where the enactment of transgressive sexual experience is allowed. It becomes a landscape for sexual fantasies, an empty canvas on which to project unutterable desires and perversions: “Per tutta la notte fui alla mercé di Tommaso e delle sue voglie inconfessate. [...] I primi mesi fui solamente il suo giocattolo personale.”⁵⁵ Moreover, as previously mentioned, the color of Rhoda’s skin is perceived as symbolic of sexual prurience, and her body is subjected to a further degree of objectification: “E tutti pensavano che con una donna nera si poteva fare di tutto.”⁵⁶ The woman becomes the receptacle for the white man’s transgressions, turning into an “essere immondo, una sorta di idra del sesso”⁵⁷ a monstrous and repelling figure out of place and out of time. This mythological reference is particularly significant for the further developments of the woman’s bodily “transfiguration” and of her contaminative potential, as the Lernaean Hydra was an ancient monster with reptilian traits whose blood was so virulent and infecting that even its traces were lethal.

Contagious abjections: towards a subversion of the colonial rhetoric

Rhoda’s first sexual intercourse sanctions the beginning of her moral and physical degeneration through an abjectifying trajectory that subverts the classical paradigm of contamination typical of the colonial discourse. Indeed, Rhoda’s infection with the HIV virus in the European context, as a consequence of her sexual encounters with the contaminated Western body, undermines and overturns the rhetoric of the European’s anxiety with cultural and physical contamination by drawing on the same range of terminology and conceptualizations. As Hardt and Negri point out, the obsession with hygiene and contagion represents a constant feature of the colonizing discourse:

⁵³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 190.

⁵⁴ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 4, Rhoda. “When I explained him that I was virgin and ‘stitched’ he became even more aroused. That unexpected news was galvanizing him.”

⁵⁵ Ibid. “All night long, I was at the mercy of Thomas and his unacknowledged desires. [...] For the first few months I was only his personal toy.”

⁵⁶ Ibid. “And everyone thought that with a black woman you could go overboard.”

⁵⁷ Ibid. “a monstrous being, like some kind of a sexual hydra.”

Physical contamination, moral corruption, madness: the darkness of the colonial territories and population is contagious, and Europeans are always at risk. [...] Once there is established the differential between the pure, civilized European and the corrupt, barbarous Other, there is possible not only a civilizing process from disease to health but also ineluctably the reverse process, from health to disease.⁵⁸

The fear of contagion has outlived the decolonizing process and, in the contemporary transnational perspective, has become an integral part of the globalization's consciousness: "This anxiety is most clearly revealed with respect to the AIDS pandemic. [...] in terms reminiscent of the colonialist imaginary: unrestrained sexuality, moral corruption and lack of hygiene."⁵⁹ In the age of global pandemics such as HIV or, more recently, Ebola, the threat of a potential contagion via the contact with an infected Other generates global anxieties and invokes the urgency for an immunization protocol. In these instances, the biological/medical trope is embraced in order to promote and legitimize political acts of exclusion and containment.

Drawing on this very same rhetoric, Rhoda's regressing path builds an inverted parallel with the trope of the colonizer's contamination as a result of the contact with the uncivilized native. In the Italian context, the eminent novel *Tempo di uccidere*⁶⁰ by Ennio Flaiano, for instance, provides a literary example of the anxiety of contagion that sees the colonizer as constantly threatened by the infected body of the savage Other. In Scego's novel instead, it is through the physical contact with the corrupted body of the Western society that Rhoda is irrevocably infected, polluted, ushering in the degrading parable that will lead her to a temporary self-annihilation: "Ma la Rhoda di prima, quella devota, religiosa, generosa, umile, amorevole, aristocratica non c'era più. Era stata sepolta dalla nuova Rhoda impura, insaziabile e sporca."⁶¹ In *Rhoda*, the colonial trope of contagion through sexual contact is inverted, as the Somali woman is infected with HIV after having engaged in promiscuous sexual intercourses in the European context. This contagion translates into a moral and bodily degenerating experience: her contamination, indeed, does not merely affect the biological or anatomical sphere, but it also involves a symmetrical decadence and abjection on the psychopathological counterpart.⁶²

Rhoda is thus compelled to internalize a contaminating power that entails a twofold level of viral burden that is "both hereditary and contagious, which is to say contagious on the vertical level of lineage as well as on the horizontal level of social communication."⁶³ HIV carries in itself this double-layered contaminative potential, therefore undermining both the present and hypothetical hereditary future preemptively conceived as shattered and diseased. As Roberto Esposito observed, "the idea of contagion, which is broad enough that it includes the entire civilized world, at a certain point closes around its own sacrificial object, drastically separating it from the healthy type, pushing

⁵⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 135.

⁵⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 136.

⁶⁰ See Ennio Flaiano, *Tempo di uccidere* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1973).

⁶¹ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 4, Rhoda. "But the previous Rhoda, the devout, religious, generous, humble, loving, aristocratic one was gone. She had been buried by the new Rhoda, the impure, dirty and insatiable one."

⁶² Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 118. For a biopolitical analysis on immigration as an immunitary threat to national integrity and on the phobia of racial contact and contagion in the context of Italian cinema see Rhiannon Noel Welch, "Contact, Contagion, Immunization Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994)" in *Italian Mobilities*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom (New York: Routledge, 2016), 68-87.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 122.

it toward a destiny of expulsion and annihilation.”⁶⁴ Infection transforms the woman into a sacrificial object that must be expelled (“abjected”) and ostracized from the healthy body of society to prevent a further spread of contamination.

Further, Scego’s inversion of the colonial trope of physical contamination parallels the tradition of the Indian anti-colonial literary production on the question of the violation of the colonized woman’s body by the western oppressor. In this corpus, the colonizer is perceived as the “untouchable person,” the contact with whom entails a disgraceful contamination. Sexual intercourse arises as a “ritual pollution transmitted through bodily fluids”⁶⁵ that must be exorcized through a purifying bath. In Rhoda’s case, the only way out of this downward trajectory is inevitable self-exile; only by detaching herself from the polluted and corrupted European context is Rhoda able to ease the burden of moral decay and dishonor: “Poi sono partita ed è cominciata una nuova fase. Una fase pulita. Una fase in cui non dovevo indossare la maschera di una superdonna. Una fase in cui ero davvero me stessa e non il tragico simulacro in cui mi ero trasformata sotto il peso di uomini osceni.”⁶⁶ Although physical pollution is irreversible, moral degeneration can still be exorcized through a purifying return to her homeland. Her honorability and her human dignity are reinstated through an attempt to subvert the dehumanizing, objectifying paradigm crushing her. Once this cathartic process is initiated, not even the threat of death can lead Rhoda astray, and her reaction to the assault perpetrated by a group of her compatriots is a token of utmost resistance:

Volevano rubare il kalashnikov a Balil e a me l’onore. [...]

In quei mesi in Somalia, ero purificata, depurata, ripulita. In un certo senso ero tornata vergine. Per questo lottai con tutta la mia forza per il mio onore. [...] Gridavo, mi dimenavo, ma alla fine la vinsi sul mio aggressore. [...] Livido di rabbia per il mancato stupro l’uomo mi colpì a tradimento con il pugnale per tutto il corpo. Avevo ferite aperte e sanguinanti dappertutto. Il taglio più grosso era all’altezza del ventre.⁶⁷

Rhoda’s body becomes the site of an actual martyrdom for the sake of preserving her honor, so hardly reattained. At the same time, the virulent blood flowing from her wounds sanctions Rhoda as untouchable and unsavable, and acts as a reminder of her physical contagiousness.

Despite the effort, not even death is able to safeguard Rhoda’s body from further violation and outrage. Her grave is profaned and her corpse dismembered at the hands of her own Somali people. Her cultural, religious, and ethnic belonging is repudiated and her body punished for its irreversible corruption: “Sono due giorni che mi hanno tirato fuori. Sono stati tre ragazzi. Giovani, magri, armati. Mi hanno tirato fuori. Uno mi ha sputato in faccia e l’altro ha preso il coltello e mi ha asportato l’occhio sinistro dall’orbita. Ci ha giocato un po’, si è divertito. Però non sono riusciti a prendermi i denti. Balil e i suoi amici sono arrivati prima. Balil è un caro ragazzo. [...] Ha vegliato la

⁶⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁵ Pamela Lothspeich, “Unspeakable Outrages and Unbearable Defilements: Rape Narratives in the Literature of Colonial India,” *Postcolonial Text* 3, no. 1 (2007): 12.

⁶⁶ Scego, *Rhoda*, section 5, Rhoda. “Then I left and a new phase began. A clean phase. A phase where I didn’t have to wear the mask of a superwoman. A phase where I was really myself, not the tragic simulacrum in which I had transformed under the weight of obscene men.”

⁶⁷ Ibid. “They wanted to steal Balil’s Kalashnikov and my honor. [...]

In those months in Somalia, I was purified, cleansed. In a way I was virgin again. For this reason, I fought with all my strength for my honor. [...] I was screaming, struggling, but in the end I prevailed over my aggressor. Livid with rage for having failed to rape me, the man suddenly struck me with the dagger all over the body. I had open wounds and I was bleeding everywhere. The biggest cut was at the level of my belly.”

mia tomba una settimana.”⁶⁸ This paragraph, located in the first section of the novel, marks the beginning of Rhoda’s testimony. Through these words, the protagonist speaks from the afterlife and starts retracing the stages of the (self)annihilating path that led her to embody the ultimate figuration of abjection: a lifeless, dismembered body. As Kristeva remarks in defining abjection, “the corpse [...] is death infecting life,”⁶⁹ it blurs the fault line between human and non-human, life and death; the boundary that preserves the integrity of the subject is thus shattered, the threat of pollution and filth is instilled and life is endangered. The desecration of Rhoda’s grave and the consequent mutilation of her corpse cause further decay in the abject dimension as it entails an even greater corruption of the lifeless body’s integrity.

In a circular structure, the novel concludes with a chapter narrated by Rhoda where she reveals the brutality of her own death and the importance of the bond established with her cousin Balil who becomes the custodian of her grave and of her message of resistance. As the only witness of Rhoda’s self-sacrifice, Balil is entrusted to keep alive the memory of her struggle. An epilogue follows in the form of a letter written by Balil to Aisha, Rhoda’s younger sister. These final pages, through Balil’s words, leave a glimmer of hope. In his letter addressed to Aisha, now pregnant, the young man expresses his faith in a better future and his attachment to his deceased cousin, ultimately suggesting to give her name to Aisha’s unborn child as recognition of her namesake’s assertive act of exemplary resistance.

Conclusion

The novel is characterized by a perturbing potential at various levels, not only does it destabilize the divide between here and the elsewhere, the self and the other, morality and corruption, but it also invites the reader to rethink and question one-sided theoretical frameworks. Scego, indeed, seems perfectly aware of the theoretical implications of her work which deliberately engages with feminist as well as postcolonial critiques, for instance by echoing, more or less explicitly, colonial tropes on race and contagion, the debate on the subaltern’s agency and the pervasiveness of the heteronormative discourse. In doing so, the author exposes the intersectional nature of the factors and constraints that shape displaced identities such as Rhoda’s and that feed into the protagonist’s abjectifying parable.

The persistence of the colonial rhetoric on race and contamination, in both postcolonial Italy and Somalia, constructs Rhoda’s body, and the body of all postcolonial subalterns, as an unassimilable “strange body” that as such needs to be expelled, exorcised. Hanging in the precarious balance between life and death, pure and impure, sainthood and depravedness, her body becomes the site for the ultimate enactment of abjectifying practices and representations. Crushed by the burden of social, cultural, religious and family expectations Rhoda succumbs and ushers in a decaying parable that will lead her to a brutal death through a sacrificial journey. This decaying trajectory puts Rhoda in connection with the tradition of the “abject saint” who, in both Medieval Christianity and Islamic Sufism, embraces marginality, humiliation, and shaming as paths to transformation and redemption. Indeed, Rhoda’s deadly choice is not an idle act of coward

⁶⁸ Ibid., section 1, Rhoda. “It’s been two days since they have dug me out. They were three guys. Young, skinny, armed. They dug me out. One spit in my face and the other took the knife and removed my left eye from its orbit. He played a little with it, he enjoyed himself. But they didn’t manage to take my teeth. Balil and his friends got here earlier. Balil is a good boy. [...] He watched over my grave for a week.”

⁶⁹ Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers*, 4.

surrender, it is consciously dictated by her urge to resist and struggle to prevent a further bodily violation.

Although Rhoda's death seems to evoke the female subaltern's impossibility to speak denounced by Spivak, the literary solution does not completely converge with historicity. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" concludes with the account of Indian anti-colonial activist Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's self-inflicted death. Not able to commit political murder the woman deliberately decided to take her own life instead, but in order to avoid that her death could be misinterpreted as a consequence of an illegitimate pregnancy she chose to commit suicide while menstruating. Nevertheless, her attempt to inscribe her message of resistance on the concreteness of her body was doomed to fail as it did not prevent her family from perceiving it as the consequence of an act of dishonor. While it is true that like Spivak's subaltern, Rhoda cannot speak and it is only after her death that she is finally able to tell her own version of the story, her inability to speak leaves out a body, an abjectified, outraged, bleeding body, which, by strenuously resisting to further violations, becomes the ultimate instrument of self-expression. Indeed, despite her death and the further dismemberment of her corpse, her sacrifice is not vain as the presence of her younger cousin Balil will allow for her message of resistance to be preserved and passed on, serving as an inspiration for those who outlived her and for the generations to come. Although her testimony is inevitably permeated and filtered through Balil's perspective, there is no space left for misinterpretation: Rhoda's immolation unquestionably sanctions her as a martyr.

Throughout the abjectifying journey, culminating with her death and dismemberment, Rhoda is fully aware of the consequences of her choices, even of the most debasing ones. Rhoda's character is consciously constructed by Scego as a fictional martyr functioning as a symbol for the many abjectified and voiceless "strange bodies" whose identities do not fit into preconceived paradigms of belonging. In this light, abjection becomes a powerful theoretical resource that enables to approach states of exclusion from multiple perspectives, including that of those who are obliged to inhabit the border zones within social, national or heterosexual normativities. Abject beings that, in order to survive their unbearable lives, are compelled to develop alternative agencies through subversive, at times repulsive, strategies, thus blurring the boundary between the inside and the outside, the socially and morally acceptable and the execrable, the self and the other.⁷⁰ The disruptive and destabilizing potential of Scego's debuting novel provides a powerful testimony, a voice to the abjectified and violated body of the subaltern; through the insistence on unsettling and, at times, disturbing images, Scego manages to graft the unspeakable fallout of social asymmetries onto the concreteness of the gendered and racialized body.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays*. Translated by David Kishik and Stefan Padatella. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Ajayi-Soyinka, Omofolabo. "Transcending the Boundaries of Power and Imperialism: Writing Gender, Constructing Knowledge." In *Female Circumcision and The Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*. Edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, 47-77. Westport: Praeger, 2005.
- Al-Sayyad, Ayisha A. "'You're What?': Engaging Narratives from Diasporic Muslim Women on Identity and Gay Liberation." In Vol. 2 of *Islam and Homosexuality*, edited by Samar Habib, 374-93. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010.

⁷⁰ Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 21.

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Colpani, Gianmaria, and Adriano Jose Habel. "In Europe It's Different": Homonationalism and Peripheral Desires for Europe." In *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe a Rainbow Europe?*, edited by Phillip M. Ayoub and David Paternotte, 73-93. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Dall'Orto, Giovanni. "I turbamenti del giovane Gender." *Hermes. Journal of Communication* 7 (2016): 33-60. Accessed September 24, 2016. <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/hermes/article/viewFile/15977/13822>.
- Derobertis, Roberto. "Holding all the Pieces Together: Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial Features in the Writing of Igiaba Scego and Cristina Ali Farah." In *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Annalisa Oboe and Shaul Bassi, 265-274. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Female Genital Mutilation: A Joint WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA Statement*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 1997.
- Flaiano, Ennio. *Tempo di uccidere*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1973.
- Giuliani Caponetto, Rosetta. "Blaxploitation Italian Style: Exhuming and Consuming the Colonial Black Venus in 1970's Cinema in Italy." In *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, 191-203. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Giuliani, Gaia, and Cristina Lombardi-Diop. *Bianco e nero: Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani*. Firenze: Le Monnier Università, 2013.
- Habib, Samar. "Introduction." In Vol. 1 of *Islam and Homosexuality*, xvii-lxii, edited by Samar Habib. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Johnsdotter, Sara. "Persistence of Tradition or Reassessment of Cultural Practices in Exile?" In *Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context*, edited by Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan, 107-134. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.
- Kirby, Vicki. "Out of Africa: 'Our Bodies Ourselves?'" In *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, 81-96. Westport: Praeger, 2005.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S. Roudiez. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lombardi-Diop, Cristina, and Caterina Romeo. "Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy." In *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, 1-29. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Lothspeich, Pamela. "Unspeakable Outrages and Unbearable Defilements: Rape Narratives in the Literature of Colonial India." *Postcolonial Text* 3, no. 1 (2007): 1-19. Accessed August 1, 2016. <http://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/viewArticle/604>.
- Jay, Martin. *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of our Time*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.
- Kassamali, Noor J. "When Modernity Confronts Traditional Practices: Female Genital Cutting in Northeast Africa." In *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity*, edited by Herbert L. Bodman and Nayyirah Tawḥīdī, 39-61. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

- Nnaemeka, Obioma. *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*. Westport: Praeger, 2005.
- Nyangweso, Mary. *Female Circumcision: The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007.
- Ponzanesi, Sandra. *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- . “Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices.” In *Italian Colonialism. Legacies and Memories*, edited by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, 165-89. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005.
- . “Queering European Sexualities Through Italy’s Fascist Past: Colonialism, Homosexuality, and Masculinities.” In *What’s Queer about Europe? Productive Encounters and Re-enchanting Paradigms*, edited by Mireille Rosello and Sudeep Dasgupta. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.
- Romeo, Caterina. “Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature.” In *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop, and Caterina Romeo, 221-236. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Sa’dāwī, Nawāl. *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1982.
- . “Imperialism and Sex in Africa.” In *Female Circumcision and the Politics of Knowledge: African Women in Imperialist Discourses*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, 21-26. Westport: Praeger, 2005.
- Scego, Igiaba. *Rhoda*. Roma: Sinnos Editrice, 2010. Nook Edition.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can The Subaltern Speak?” In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271-313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Sullivan, Barbara. “Rape, Prostitution and Consent.” *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* (Australian Academic Press) 40, no. 2 (August 2007): 127-142. Accessed August 1, 2016. doi:10.1375/acri.40.2.127
- Talle, Aud. “Female Circumcision in Africa and Beyond.” In *Transcultural Bodies: Female Genital Cutting in Global Context*, edited by Ylva Hernlund and Bettina Shell-Duncan, 91-106. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.
- Trappolin, Luca. “Gender Victims and Cultural Borders: The Globalization of Prostitution in Italy.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 29, no. 3/4 (2005): 335-348.
- Tyler, Imogen. *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books, 2013.
- Welch, Rhiannon Noel. “Contact, Contagion, Immunization Gianni Amelio’s Lamerica (1994).” In *Italian Mobilities*, edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom, 68-87. New York: Routledge, 2016.