Carla Macoggi, *Kkeywa. Storia di una bimba meticcia* (Roma: Sensibili alle Foglie, 2011), 104 pp.

Carla Macoggi, *La nemesi della rossa* (Roma: Sensibili alle Foglie, 2012), 104 pp.

Reviewed by **Fidelia Veltre**

The world of Italian publishing has recently been enriched by the stimulating contributions of a new generation of Italian-speaking writers of foreign origin. These authors' works mainly deal with topics such as the condition of exile, the difficulty of asserting migrants' identity and rights against prejudice and discrimination and the defense of their roots and culture, giving rise to a new genre, migration literature, which I would define as an Italian version of postcolonial literature. Their writing is characterized by something the Kenyan writer, activist and performer Shailja Patel has defined as "migritude", conjoining 'migrant' and 'attitude' in a single term. As she explains in a number of interviews, this neologism allows her to confront two different aspects of the will to migrate, whether by choice or the need to survive, that affect the lives of millions of people caught up in the political and economic processes of global society. It is also the title she gives to a performance and a book that brings together her poems, letters, interviews and the backstage diary of her performances (*Migritude*, New York: Kaya Press, 2010).

Migration literature in Italy is quite a recent phenomenon, beginning in the 90s, and is still in a relatively early stage. Its late start may be due to the nature of Italian colonial experience, which was shorter and more limited than that of other European colonial powers (lasting from 1882 until the Second World War, and restricted to Libya and the Horn of Africa), but also to the fact that Italian was far less widespread than other languages expressing imperial power, such as English, Spanish, French and Portuguese. In the last few years this literary production in Italy has found an outlet in online magazines such as *Eks&Tra* and *El Ghibli*, or literary prizes such as the "Concorso Letterario Nazionale Lingua Madre". Migration literature is also promoted through creative writing workshops, theatrical and musical performances, public readings, websites and blogs, forming a lively mix of different languages where the idea of migrancy is no longer just connected to trouble and hardship but also to creative and positive energy. The more established authors prefer not to be classified as 'migrant writers'; a label they see as locking them in a ghetto and limiting the subjects they deal with; it is time, they feel, that they should be considered to be new Italian writers in all respects.

There is now a wide range of interesting literary proposals by writers – especially women – from the old Italian colonies, living in Italy as first- or second-generation immigrants (as, for example, Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego). Among the

most noteworthy women writers are Ribka Sibhatu and Erminia Dell'Oro from Eritrea; Farah, Scego and Kaha Mohamed Aden from Somalia, Gabriella Ghermandi, Maria Abbebù Viarengo and Martha Nasibù from Ethiopia, Luciana Capretti from Libya. While all of them have made the choice of 'writing back' by taking possession of the Italian language in a creative and original way, there is considerably variety in their style of writing and in the use they make of Italian, sometimes including words or expressions from their mother tongue or reflecting the orality of traditional African literature in their narratives. A case apart is that of Carla Macoggi.

One of the most recent authors, Macoggi was born in Addis Ababa in 1965 from an Ethiopian mother and an Italian father. After her childhood in Ethiopia, she moved to Italy and settled in Bologna, where she graduated in Law. She has published short stories – "Luna", in *Lingua Madre Duemilanove* (Torino: Seb27, 2009); "Enea" (*Nigrizia*, January 2010); "A Taitu piaceva il Filowha"*,* in *Roma d'Abissinia* (Cuneo: Nerosubianco, 2010) – and two closely inter-connected novels.

Kkeywa. Storia di una bimba meticcia (2011) tells the story of a child, Fiorella, the daughter of an Ethiopian woman and an Italian man, who was forced to move to Italy at the age of twelve, uprooted from her home and deprived of her rights, identity and family ties – an indirect long-term effect of the Italian colonial past. Published for the first time in 2004 by Sovera Multimedia with the title *La via per il Paradiso*, the novel was modified in the 2011 edition. In the preface to the second edition, the author gives greater depth to the subject of her story by framing it in its historical background – colonial and postcolonial Ethiopia. She also discusses the phenomenon of hybridization, examining it from both a cultural and legal perspective and including an analysis of the fascist laws about relations between Italian colonizers and native people. Although Fiorella's father dies early in his daughter's life (or, rather, the man Fiorella believes to be her father – only in Macoggi's second novel, *La nemesi della rossa*, will the identity of her true father be revealed), his figure is central to the novel, representing the 'human aspect of colonialism'; for him, fatherhood was a private chance of redemption against the public responsibility of an Army officer sent to Africa to serve the purpose of the Italian Empire, under Mussolini's dictatorship. Despite his example, no balance is possible between the rights of the colonized and those of the colonizers.

Kkeywa in Amharic stands for hybrid, half-breed, clear skin, red-head – the identity the child wrestles with through a series of traumatic experiences, beginning during her early years in Ethiopia. Compelled to leave her daughter while she tries to recover the possessions she has lost during the riots that broke out after the coup d'état in 1974, Fiorella's natural mother sends her to a pension, run by Romana Gridoni, an elderly Italian emigrant, who pretends to be the child's aunt and forces her to work for her. Leading her to believe her mother has abandoned her, Fiorella's 'aunt' subjects her to a process of out-and-out Italianization, in keeping with Fascist colonial policy intended to save and separate the Italian 'blood' of mixed race children from contamination from their non-Italian

elements, as Macoggi explains in a recent interview with Eugenia Foddai on Radio Onda d'Urto. Already physically and affectively separated from her mother, the child is also made to lose her mother tongue, cultural roots and the whole of her natural mother's world when she is no longer allowed to attend Amharic lessons at school. Finally, at the end of the novel, she is torn from her original homeland: on the flight from Addis Ababa to Rome with Romana, Fiorella's fragile world falls apart and she breaks down.

The story of Fiorella, hovering between two different identities and communities, Italian and Ethiopian, raises the issue of a third possibility, that of hybridization. Macoggi's work is based on an anxious search for cultural identity from an in-between position. This way to self-assertion is complicated by the historical implications of Italian colonialism and its present long-term effects. Although Macoggi's novels are undoubtedly less stimulating linguistically than the work of authors such as Farah, Aden, Ghermandi and Scego, as they show no attempt to contaminate the Italian language with the author's mother tongue or with the characteristics of traditional oral culture, this is an issue that finds its explanation within the texts themselves, in the painful process of Italianization to which their little protagonist is subjected.

Despite the depth of the questions it raises, Kkeywa is marred by its excessive sentimentality and the prolixity of the author's style. Nevertheless, I see it as a useful addition to migration literature, particularly as a text to be adopted in Italian schools, where it could encourage a more informed and critical approach to the colonial past and its effects in the increasingly multilingual and multicultural condition of present-day Italy, and consequently as a way of stimulating debate on intercultural education.

Macoggi's second novel, *La nemesi della rossa* (2012), which continues the story of *Kkeywa*, is a far more satisfying work from a literary point of view, due also to its more original, self-reflexively hybrid technique since the novel is half memoir, half theatrical script. In her interview with Eugenia Foddai, Macoggi insists that neither of her novels is to be considered as an example of autobiographical writing, which she seems to take as implying 'objectivity' and an exact reconstruction of events. Although some of the experiences of her protagonist echo her own, the character of Fiorella does not coincide with Carla. As the narrative is mainly based on affective memory, her works fall rather into the category of memoir.

In her new novel, Macoggi takes up the story of Fiorella at exactly the point in which she had left her at the end of *Kkeywa*: in 1977, when her sudden and incomprehensible departure for Italy leads to temporary residence in the new country. After a brief return to Ethiopia, she moves definitively back to Italy, where Romana leaves her in a convent in Bologna. There she stays until the age of sixteen, when she goes to live with a foster family belonging to CL, the *Comunione e Liberazione* movement (a lay ecclesial Catholic movement founded in 1954 by the theologian Luigi Giussani). After a series of misunderstandings, she returns to the convent, where the nuns pocket all the money she earns from her occasional,

underpaid job as babysitter. She attends the Law faculty at Bologna university and goes to live on her own with other students who are members of CL, but on graduation she loses her State aid and suddenly becomes poor and homeless. Appealed to for help, her former foster family misunderstands her terrible hunger and stress – ending in a nervous breakdown – and abandons her, at the age of 24, in the psychiatric ward of a hospital.

This part of the story seems almost to be written in a state of hypnosis, as if the author were actually feeling the same anxiety as her protagonist, communicated through the throbbing rhythm of her writing. Little by little, Fiorella succeeds in taking control of her life and decides to search for government documents in order to reconstruct the events of her life in Italy. The truth is eventually uncovered: when she settled in Italy, Romana was appointed to be her adoptive mother under Ethiopian law and her guardian in Italy, with Terza (Romana's sister), as her deputy-guardian; should she have trouble, she could rely on the help of a probate judge, a possibility she had never even been aware of. Above all, she finds out that Romana, Terza, the foster family and the nuns had all received State aid in order to take care of her, while all along she had spent her whole time in Italy in a condition of uncertainty, poverty, affective instability, solitude, economic exploitation, psychological abuse. With unbearable hypocrisy, everything was supposed to be done "for the girl's own good" (51, my translation). All decisions were made for her by others, with no explanations: during each of her several moves, someone silently packed for her, but it was actually Fiorella who was being packed away. The style suddenly changes in the final part and the memoir turns into a theatrical script. A trial is performed, involving all the characters, through a stage trick I prefer not to disclose.

More than a geographical and cultural journey, *La nemesi della rossa* tells about the journey of a soul, as the novel is based on the protagonist's difficult journey to adulthood and the difficulties she has to face in order to claim her right to exist. Normal development is inhibited and censored throughout: "Is it possible they taught me not to speak? Who could have made me an infant forever?" (55, my translation). The work forcefully denounces the bigotry, hypocrisy and sordidness typical of some of the religious groups the girl encounters. Free expression of her personality and gender identity is repressed, distorting her relationship with males and her perception of sex. In order to make herself loved and accepted, Fiorella submits to every possible form of control and censorship, renouncing her right to privacy and becoming more and more invisible: "If anything happened, what exactly I don't know, it would definitely be the woman's fault, the nuns used to say…. So I made myself shapeless and indistinct. So as not to be guilty" (47, my translation).

Repression involves every aspect of her life. Both with the nuns and the foster family, and most particularly in the presence of Romana, Fiorella's opinions and emotions are silenced and she is allowed neither to laugh nor cry. In addition to the vulnerability brought on by her lack of parental protection and care, is the

marginality and fragility caused by her hybridity, immediately visible in the colour of her skin. Her in-between condition – neither African, nor completely Italian – makes her development even more complicated.

In his preface, Fulvio Pezzarossa (a professor of the Sociology of Literature at Bologna University and the editor of *Scritture Migranti. Rivista di Scambi Interculturali*) describes the book as "a text which is able to give substance to a new season for our Literature" (12, my translation), pointing out the force with which it raises the question of avoiding an over-hasty fixing of a canonical form in postcolonial writing. Among the aspects of Macoggi's writing he focuses on is the unusual female version of the Western colonizer, embodied by the character of Romana Gridoni. The old Italian woman is arrogant, cynical, racist, with a strong sexual appetite, always ready to exploit other people, so that the traditional patriarchal position of power seems to fit her perfectly. From a linguistic point of view, Pezzarossa underlines the author's knowledge and command of Italian: her use of the language turns it into a fundamental element for social recognition and equal interaction, enabling her to emerge from the shadows and make herself visible and alive. "When I learned Italian the world grew larger. The names of things multiplied, but I could reveal this novelty only to myself", the author writes (59, my translation). Her writing is thus a therapeutic instrument, allowing her to develop her repressed personality and no longer obey the injunction to exist in silence. Writing, Pezzarossa comments, is a 'way of healing', because it can alleviate the suffering of soul and repair its lacerations, so that each piece of the mosaic can return to its true position and the whole picture be completed.

Even though the novel weeps tears of sorrow in each line, the author is able to experience the power of the word and use it for Fiorella/Carla's final redemption, as announced in the title of the book. Thus, the protagonist finally recovers her lightness and looks confidently towards her future, as we read in the epilogue: "Everything is enormously heavy. The secret lies in encapsulating the stone in a cloud to make it light" (97, my translation).

In her radio interview, Macoggi emphasizes that far from being limited to the microcosm of her individual experience; her story is intended to provide evidence that can be used in avoiding similar cases of injustice and abuse encouraging respect for the rights of migrant children: "Fiorella has suffered for everybody. That's enough!" (my translation). Like the other female writers from Eastern Africa who are animating the scene of migration literature in Italy, she shows how important it is to take the floor and break through the silence of exile. Writing plays a significant role in a process of emancipation that involves culture, psychology, social status and gender identity. The authors' double marginality, as women (in a world that is still largely dominated by men) and as writers with a foreign origin, impels them to action and creativity.