



# Literary Voices Of The Second Generation Of Immigrants In Contemporary Italy: A Critical Study

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**Abstract:** This paper critically examines the impact of the literary voices of second-generation immigrants in Contemporary Italy, with a focus on their capacity as agents of change in challenging and reshaping Italian social and cultural norms. As Italy struggles with evolving demographics and multicultural challenges, the role of these writers becomes increasingly significant. This paper explores the complex experiences of writers born or raised in Italy, navigating questions of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity. Through a thorough analysis of prominent works of authors such as Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo, Randa Ghazy, Sumaya Abdel Qader, Khalid Chaouki, Brhan Tesfay, and Rania Ibrahim, these authors actively reconstruct their identities, offering a counterpoint to prevailing stereotypes and legal frameworks. Ultimately, their contributions foster a more inclusive and accepting society by promoting a global outlook that embraces diversity for a harmonious and comprehensible Italy.

**Keywords:** Second Generation, homogeneous, immigrants, multicultural identity, voices.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Italy, with its strategic positioning at the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea, has historically been a melting pot for diverse peoples and cultures. This geographical centrality has contributed to a rich cultural amalgamation that is evident in various aspects of Italian life, ranging from cuisine to language, architecture, and religious practices. Despite this cultural diversity, the official public discourse has paradoxically adhered to the culturally constructed myth of Italy's singular and homogenous identity, rooted in whiteness, heterosexuality, and adherence to Catholicism. This prevailing narrative not only marginalizes minority voices but also shapes societal norms in Italy.

Italy has traditionally been characterized by mass emigration, experienced a pivotal transition in the early 1990s, transforming into a significant recipient of immigrants. This shift has resulted in an alteration of Italy's landscape and the introduction of racial, religious, and linguistic diversity within the country. This departure from the historical norm has sparked an examination of the intricate relationship between the dominant constructed identity and the multicultural realities of contemporary Italian society.

However, the reception of newcomers on Italian soil has not always been welcoming, and the process of integration has been challenging and problematic at diverse levels, with issues extending even to Second-generation Italians who struggle to be recognized as such. The Italian media has consistently depicted immigration in a negative light since the beginning, employing terms such as "biblical exodus" and "mass

invasion" to describe it. This has led to the marginalization of immigrants and the association of immigration with criminality, which in turn has contributed to the perception of immigration as a national threat.

In their research on immigration in Italy, Giuseppe Sciortino and Asher Colombo, both sociologists, have drawn attention to the change in terminology from referring to immigrants or foreign workers to "extracomunitari." This change underscores the exclusion of these individuals from the broader community. The term "extracomunitario," denoting a person not from a European Union member state, has been used to categorize individuals not assimilable to the presumed idea of "italianità" (Italianess). They stated that:

For the press, immigration has become of crucial importance for the entire social life of the country. We are witnessing the birth of a new narrative domain, defined and fed by a more generic and therefore more ecumenical vision of immigration<sup>1</sup>.

As Italy struggles with the complex consequences of global migration, the focus of public discourse often revolves around new arrivals, undocumented immigrants, security concerns and cultural threats. However, the experiences of the second generation, labelled as 2G who are often denied treatments as real Italians by their peer, in public debate and legislation continues to be marginalised within the broader framework of the contemporary immigration debate in Italy.

Despite the negative tone, migrants are claiming new spaces in the Italian society and gaining access to cultural practices as reflected in the flourishing literary scene. The emergence of literary voices belonging to second-generation immigrants is crucial for understanding the complex realities they face. These voices offer counter-narratives to prevailing discourses, offering perspectives that challenge stereotypes, objectification, and exclusion. Through mediums such as fiction, journalism, movies, documentaries, and songs, migrants are reclaiming agency, contesting dominant narratives, and contributing to the on-going evolution of Italian society.

This paper critically examines the impact of the literary voices of second-generation immigrants in Contemporary Italy, with a focus on their capacity as agents of change in challenging and reshaping Italian social and cultural norms. As Italy struggles with evolving demographics and multicultural challenges, the role of these writers becomes increasingly significant. This paper explores the complex experiences of writers born or raised in Italy, navigating questions of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity. Through a thorough analysis of prominent works of authors such as Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo, Randa Ghazy, Sumaya Abdel Qader, Khalid Chaouki, Brhan Tesfay, and Rania Ibrahim, these authors actively reconstruct their identities, offering a counterpoint to prevailing stereotypes and legal frameworks. Ultimately, their contributions foster a more inclusive and accepting society by promoting a global outlook that embraces diversity for a harmonious and comprehensible Italy. This research highlights the transformative role of these writers in shaping a society that values and appreciates the richness of cultural differences.

## II. Evolving Landscape of Migrant Literature in Contemporary Italy

The Italian literary landscape has undergone a transformative evolution in recent decades, marked by the growing contributions of migrant writers who have played a pivotal role in challenging and redefining the conventional notion of Italian identity. This identity, which was founded on an idea of linguistic and cultural homogeneity, has been challenged by migrant literature, which has served as a powerful voice expressing the pain and challenges faced by millions of immigrants.

The initial phase of migrant literature, which emerged in the 1990s, served as a powerful voice expressing the pain and challenges faced by millions of immigrants. These writers, originating from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, explored the themes of uprooting, exclusion, prejudice, violence, belonging, adapting to the host society, and the pursuit of legal status. Through their work, these authors engaged in a form of resistance, challenging media representations, and legal stereotypes associated with a state of emergency and undesirability. Pop Khouma, one of the first immigrant writers said that for him his first novel *Io venditore di elefanti*<sup>2</sup> (1990) was for him *a way of talking back to the legal system and to media*

<sup>1</sup> Sciortino, G., & Colombo, A. (2004). The flows and the flood: the public discourse on immigration in Italy, 1969–2001. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9(1), p102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571042000179209>

<sup>2</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "I was an Elephant Salesman".

representations, which associated migrants with a state of emergency and undesirability<sup>3</sup>. Scholars such as Lidia Curti, Graziella Parati, and Sandra Ponzanesi emphasize the role of migrant literature in giving voice to marginalized groups and challenging the implicit whiteness and homogeneity associated with Europe and its nation-states.

In the book *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, Graziella Parati characterizes the emergence of migrant literature as a social and political act of recolouring the culture by talking back “To recolour the Italian national identity in this context means to respond, by talking back, to an ideologically motivated attempt to homogenize Italian identity and defend it from the ‘Other.’<sup>4</sup>”

According to Alessandra Di Maio, Migrant voices are:

Claiming for themselves the right to speak with their own voices, to tell their stories from their own standpoints, and to write the history to which they have been contributing participants, these writers re-manipulate and revolt against the narratives created on and about them. With the force of their own creative imaginations, they portray their own experiences as African migrants to Italy, thereby appropriating the reins of the nation’s discourse on immigration. From narrative objects, they have made themselves narrative subjects<sup>5</sup>.

In contemporary times, the second generation of migrant writers has made significant contributions to literature by moving beyond autobiographical narratives and adopting complex storytelling techniques that critically examine immigration and citizenship laws. Unlike the first wave of migrant writers who primarily focused on the harsh realities of migration, the second generation of writers, born or raised in Italy, no longer rely on collaborators; adopt a lighter approach to depict their unique experiences of navigating identity, citizenship, belonging, and cultural hybridity. As highlighted by Graziella Parati, that the second generation of writers *make light of the situation through themes of irony and paradoxical situations*<sup>6</sup>.

However, these writers had not experienced the challenge of leaving their country for an uncertain future; rather, they were born in Italy or arrived in Italy at a very early age, and Italian was their main language. Thus, they narrate the struggle with their Italian identity, as well as that of their parents’ homeland. Though they typically identify as Italian, other Italians do not perceive them as such; simultaneously, they are not recognized as belonging to the ethnicity of their families because they often do not speak the language of their parents and are familiar only with Italian culture.

The most salient characteristics of the literature produced by second-generation authors are:

- **Skilled Manipulation of Language:** These authors, who are either born or raised in Italy, possess an in-depth understanding of the Italian language and culture. They skilfully blend various linguistic forms, such as street language, regional dialects, local jargon, and multimedia languages, showcasing their linguistic versatility. Additionally, they combine high and popular culture forms, aiming to find new ways of expressing the social and cultural changes they face.
- **Use of Irony and Cultural References:** They incorporate irony draws upon popular cultural references, adding depth and reliability to their narratives.
- **Representation of Hybrid Identities:** The authors portray characters with hybrid identities, reflecting the complex fusion of their backgrounds and experiences.
- **Dramatization of Intergenerational Conflict:** The works often dramatize the conflicts that arising between different generations, highlighting the tensions within families and communities.
- **Challenging Italian Institutions:** The literature explores the complex and often complicated relationships between second-generation immigrants and Italian institutions.

<sup>3</sup> Romeo, C. (2015). Remapping Cityscapes: Postcolonial Diasporas and Representations of Urban Space in Contemporary Italian Literature, in *Semestrare di studi e ricerche di geografia*, XXVII, p.102.  
[https://www.academia.edu/25850041/Remapping\\_Cityscapes\\_Postcolonial\\_Diasporas\\_and\\_Representations\\_of\\_Urban\\_Space\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_Italian\\_Literature](https://www.academia.edu/25850041/Remapping_Cityscapes_Postcolonial_Diasporas_and_Representations_of_Urban_Space_in_Contemporary_Italian_Literature).

<sup>4</sup> Parati, G. (2005). *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p.50.

<sup>5</sup> Di Maio, A. (2009). *Black Italia: Contemporary Migrant Writers from Africa. Black Europe and the African Diaspora*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, p.127.

<sup>6</sup> Parati, G.:*op.cit.*,p.12.

The following themes emerged and evolved over time in this body of literature:

- **Racism and Racialization:** These authors address issues of racism and the processes of racialization within Italian society, shedding light on discriminatory practices and attitudes.
- **Challenges in Attaining Italian Citizenship:** The difficulties faced by the second generation in obtaining Italian citizenship are a central theme, highlighting bureaucratic and legal hurdles.
- **Construction of Italian Identity:** The authors explore how immigrants and their children navigate the construction of an Italian identity and reconcile it with their diverse backgrounds.
- **Redefined Italianità (Italian-ness):** This literature examines how migratory processes contribute to reshaping the notion of Italianità or Italian-ness, emphasizing the evolving and diverse nature of Italian society.
- **Critique of Immigration Regulation:** The literature serve as a platform to critique the Italian state's regulation of migration and the acquisition of citizenship, addressing issues of fairness and inclusivity.
- **Belonging and Not-Belonging:** This study examines the complex emotions of belonging and non-belonging experienced by second-generation immigrants within the society in which they live.

Over the years, literature of second-generation immigrants has witnessed substantial growth and development, giving rise to a diverse array of authors. Notable among these authors are individuals such as Igiaba Scego, Ingy Mubiayi, Gabriella Kuruvilla, Layla Wadia, Gabriella Ghermandi, Cristina Ali Farah, Christiana de Calda Brito, Marilena Umuhozza, Ubx Cristina Ali Farah, Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo, Gabriella Kuruvilla, Igiaba Scego, Muin Mubiayi, Zhu Oifeng, Sumaya Abdel Qader, Antonio Dikele Distefano, Randa Ghazy and many more. These writers have played a crucial role in broadening and enriching the literary landscape by sharing their unique perspectives and experiences as second-generation immigrants to Contemporary Italy. They significantly contribute to the on-going discourse on identity, belonging, and the evolving nature of Italian society. Their literary voice, both a response to and a reflection of the shifting social and cultural conditions, is instrumental in challenging the prevailing narratives and securing a place within the canon of Italian literature.

### III. Prominent writers of Second-generation of immigrants and their works.

In this section, I discuss some prominent writers of second-generation immigrants and their works.

#### Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo: Pioneering Second-Generation Writer in Italy

Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo occupies a distinctive position within the canon of Italian literature, being recognized as the first second-generation writer of immigrant background. During the period in which the literary landscape was primarily dominated by first-generation migrant writers, Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo emerged as an exception, as he was part of the second generation, whose primary language was Italian. Born in Brazzaville, Congo, he immigrated to Italy at the age of four. His literary journey began in 1999 with the publication of "Verso la Notte Bakonga"<sup>7</sup>.

In his debut work, "Verso la Notte Bakonga" Gangbo embraced the classical coming of age genre, focusing on the existential dilemmas faced by the protagonist, Mika, and his quest for self-discovery. Significantly, Gangbo reinterpreted the dynamic between the individual and society by emphasizing the alienating impact of the protagonist's blackness. Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo's second novel, "Rometta e Giulio"<sup>8</sup>, is a work that employs an experimental approach in both language and structure. While drawing inspiration from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," the novel reinterprets the classic romance between an Italian student and a Chinese pizza deliveryman. The narrative is further enriched by a metanarrative that reflects on the writing process itself. By fusing together street slang, Shakespearean language, and even incorporating stage directions within the text, Gangbo undertakes a linguistic experiment that adds a unique dimension to the work. Gangbo's linguistic experimentation extended to the story "Com'è se giù vuol dire ko?"<sup>9</sup>, delved into the theme of police violence against young immigrants and Black Italians. In this story, the protagonists

<sup>7</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "Toward the Bakonga Night".

<sup>8</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "Rometta and Giulio(Julio)".

<sup>9</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "What if down means Ko?"

communicate through rap, incorporating Italian street slang and Bolognese dialect to emphasize the "glocal" nature of their surroundings.

His novel, "Due volte,<sup>10</sup>" further highlights Gangbo's exploration of duality. Moving beyond the simple binary opposition of Italian/immigrant or black/white, the protagonists, ten-year-old twin boys from Benin, confront the challenge of finding a place in their father's culture while simultaneously yearning to assimilate into the new society. Their experiences mirror those of socially marginalized children. Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo's literary contributions have been instrumental in shaping contemporary Italian literature. His works expand the boundaries of traditional forms and explore innovative modes of expression that reflect the evolving social and cultural climate of his era.

### **"Between Worlds: Randa Ghazy's Exploration of Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Italy"**

Randa Ghazy, a significant second-generation writer born to Egyptian parents in Italy in 1986, emerged onto the literary scene in 2007 with the publication of her autobiographical novel, "Oggi forse non ammazzo nessuno. Storie di una giovane mussulmana stranamente non terrorista."<sup>11</sup> In this compelling work, Ghazy takes the reader on a profound journey through the life of Jasmine, a young girl, as she navigates the challenges of constructing her identity. The narrative delves into the complexities of being caught between two contrasting worlds: that of her parents' perspective and that of the society that raised her. Ghazy's novel explores the intricate nature of identity and belonging as experienced by second-generation individuals, who find themselves suspended between two or more cultural worlds. The work also sheds light on the dearth of thriving multiculturalism in Italy, which marginalizes second-generation immigrants, highlighting the negative consequences of this lack of cultural diversity. Through her writing, Ghazy provides a powerful voice to those who share similar experiences and challenges in navigating their dual identities and the cultural dynamics of contemporary Italy.

### **"Navigating Dual Realities in Sumaya Abdel Qader's New Italian Narrative"**

Sumaya Abdel Qader, another important voice of second-generation writer, born to a Jordanian-Palestine mother and father in Italy. Her work "Porto il velo, adoro i Queen. Nuove italiane crescono."<sup>12</sup> published in 2008, offers a compelling narrative that describes the daily struggles of a young, veiled Muslim woman living in Italy. The story revolves around seemingly ordinary activities, such as going to the gym, visiting the beach, or doing grocery shopping, which one might expect to be unproblematic. However, in Sumaya Abdel Qader's narrative, these commonplace activities become catalysts for self-examination and introspection about her sense of belonging in Italian society. At the core of her work is the central theme of identity. Sumaya Abdel Qader artfully explores the complex layers of identity and the challenges that arise when one's appearance, beliefs, and cultural background interact within the context of a diverse society. Her storytelling highlights the daily experiences of both mundane and meaningful, which shape the identity and experiences of second-generation immigrants in Italy, shedding light on the quest for belonging in a multifaceted cultural landscape.

### **"Salaam, Italy! Khalid Chaouki's Insight into the Struggles of Young Italian Muslims"**

Khalid Chaouki, born in Casablanca and raised in Italy, his work "Salaam, Italia!: la voce di un giovane musulmano italiano"<sup>13</sup> sheds light on generational clashes that often arise when the younger generation of immigrants navigates the intersection of their cultural heritage and the assimilation expectations of their host nation. These conflicts can be deeply personal and highlight the tension between maintaining one's cultural roots and adapting to the cultural norms of the country in which they reside. The work also underscores the sense of rejection experienced by individuals, such as Khalid Chaouki and their peers. While Italy strives for assimilation, the process is not always smooth, and second-generation immigrants may face challenges, misconceptions, and a struggle for acceptance. Through his work, Khalid Chaouki offers readers a valuable perspective on the complexities of identity and belonging faced by second-generation immigrants in Italy, providing a voice for those who deal with these issues on a personal level.

<sup>10</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "Twice".

<sup>11</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "Today maybe I won't kill anyone. Stories of a young Muslim woman who is strangely non-terrorist".

<sup>12</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "I wear the veil, I love Queen. New Italians are growing."

<sup>13</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "Salaam, Italy! The voices of a young Italian Muslim."

## "Islam in Love: Navigating Forbidden Passions and Cultural Clashes in Rania Ibrahim's Narrative"

In Rania Ibrahim's 2017 novel, "Islam in Love," the complexities of adolescent relationships take center stage, the narrative woven with themes of love and cultural clashes. The story unfolds around a forbidden love affair with Shakespearean undertones, featuring a young Englishwoman of Egyptian descent, Laila, who falls in love with Mark, the son of a local, far-right leader. This forbidden love sparks an epic clash between families and communities they represent. Laila's journey is portrayed with all its contradictions and insecurities caught between the two distant cultures. Laila and Mark boldly confront an intimate clash of civilizations, shedding the symbols and unquestionable dogmas imposed by society and choosing to love beyond these boundaries. Rania Ibrahim provides a sincere and frank exploration of a Muslim girl's initial encounters with sexuality. The novel effectively immerses the reader in Laila's thoughts, authentically portraying the "classic" details and experiences common to second-generation Muslims, often overlooked by their peers. The symbolism of the veil, which serves as both a symbol of faith and temptation, evokes relatable experiences and distant memories for many readers.

## "Navigating Identity and Confronting Racism: Marilena Delli Umhuza's Literary Exploration"

Marilena Delli Umhuza, born in Italy to a father from Bergamo and a Rwandese mother, is not only a writer but also an award-winning photographer and director. She wrote four books on racism in Italy. These books, based on her personal experiences of growing up with an immigrant mother in a conservative region of Italy, provide a unique perspective on the challenges of identity and integration. Her literary debut, "Razzismo all'Italiana. Cronache di una spia mezzosangue"<sup>14</sup> a memoir published in 2016. This book explores Marilena's autobiographical experiences as an Italo-Rwandan girl growing up in Bergamo, Italy, providing insights into her encounters with racism, identity struggles, and the challenges of integration in a conservative environment. The narrative delves into the complexities of her cultural background and the societal dynamics she has navigated, offering a first-hand account of the impact of racism on individuals with mixed heritage.

"Negretta – Baci razzisti"<sup>15</sup> is the second work by Marilena Delli Umhuza that recounts the author's observations on the persistence of closed-mindedness, racism, and intolerance in Italy, and the potential role that schools, literature, and culture can play in combating these issues. Set in the 1990s, the novel focuses on the story of Marilena Gallitelli, more frequently addressed with the unflattering epithet "negretta." She is the daughter of Chantal, a Rwandese woman who survived the genocide. The family lives in the vicinity of Bergamo within an angry, impoverished, degraded, sexist, and, above all, racist community. With the advent of Lega Nord, which finds fertile ground in the Bergamo milieu, Marilena paradoxically finds herself having to deal not only with classmates explicitly supportive of the Northern League but also with a mother and a father who easily identify with the same ideals. Here, the protagonist shows the difficulty in making others understand the emotional condition of those who experience racism. Many think of prejudice and racism as something overt: physical attacks and insults. Indeed, there are such instances, but it is important to understand that daily micro-aggressions are even more harmful.

"Pizza Mussolini," in a way, completes the story begun by the author with her first fiction work, "Negretta. Baci razzisti". "Pizza Mussolini" tells the story of Mariella, born and raised in Bergamo, who spent her youth defending herself against low blows of racism. She has endured the constant onslaught of racism throughout her youth, often facing the derogatory term "Negra!" as an insult. The author presents Mariella with confidence and self-awareness. She doesn't feel white or black but simply herself, unlike many immigrant protagonists who are often portrayed as confused and deeply insecure in defining themselves. Diversity is a source of strength for Mariella. With her attitude, she exposes racist prejudices perpetuated by white people, besieging the lives of black people. The novel tackles issues that arise in daily interactions, whether explicitly or implicitly. The protagonist prompts us to discuss these issues by dispelling of common beliefs and misunderstandings.

Thousands of kilometers away, in Malawi, Luna's birth was greeted with an omen of misfortune due to her skin being too light, and she has been called "Witch!" ever since. The abuses they suffer as women are identical, even within distant contexts. Whether in Italy or Malawi, protagonists become foreign and mute

<sup>14</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "Italian-style Racism: Chronicles of a Half-Blood Spy." The title translates to "Italian-style Racism: Chronicles of a Half-Blood Spy" in English.

<sup>15</sup> The name of the book translated in English as "Little black girl –Resists Kisses" in English.

bodies in a context that names them but does not engage with them, using them for propaganda but not listening to them. They are depersonalized bodies without identity, thoughts, and opinions. The novel explores issues that arise in everyday interactions, both overtly and covertly.

These novels highlight that the racism debate in Italy is often superficial, tied to attacks on individuals of different ethnicities or highly publicized cases involving migrants, only to fade away afterward. The bodies of black/brown people such as Mariella and Marilena Gallitelli are evanescent figures, monopolized by someone who uses them as a shield to avoid reflecting on the society they live in.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, literary works produced by second-generation immigrants in Italy have had a profound impact on the questioning of Italian social and cultural norms. These works serve as agents of change, actively reshaping Italian culture and society, while positioning Italy to a global perspective. They challenge and even unsettle the traditional definition of "Italian" identity, as noted by Alessandra Di Maio these works introducing new voices into the discourse on Italian multicultural identity and debunking the myth of homogenous national identity. These works confront dominant narratives that seek to defend a unitary Italian culture against the tide of hybridization and defy the portrayal of the Italian population as a monolithic entity and migrants as either dangerous or victimized individuals stripped of agency.

In their narratives, these authors actively reconstructed their identities from their own perspective, rupturing the dominant literary discourse. Through the varied spectrum of fiction, they share personal experiences and the daily challenges they face, providing a powerful counterpoint to media representations and legal systems that have often stigmatized migrants as emergency or undesirable. Alessandra Di Maio states in the article "Black Italia: Contemporary Migrant writers from Africa" that *their stories provide more textured details about these issues than are usually provided by sociologists or by the media and legal texts*<sup>16</sup>.

These writers are not merely storytellers; they are agents of change who challenge stereotypes and raise awareness of the experiences of second-generation immigrants. Their contributions are instrumental in promoting a more inclusive and accepting society in Italy, which represents a growing movement within the literary and artistic world. This movement seeks to reimagine a continuously evolving global social system, highlighting the importance of unity and embracing diverse perspectives for a more harmonious and understandable society.

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<sup>16</sup> Di Maio, A: *op.cit.*, p.120.

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