Memory and Narrative Positionality. Depicting the Italian Doctor/Colonial Other Relationship in the Post-war Period[1]

MICHELE BALDARO
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia – Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt

INTRODUCTION

Over recent years, a growing awareness has emerged regarding the issue of positionality. Within academic research, a scholar's preexisting epistemological assumptions may lead to potentially problematic outcomes and biased knowledge which reflect their own worldview. Although its implications are apparently subtle or purely discursive, this reflection can be applied also to cultural production to some extent. Within cultural and postcolonial studies, Said's *Orientalism* highlights that being European is not a neutral fact when representing non-Western Otherness.[2] In their contributions, Gayatri Spivak[3] and Linda Alcoff[4] also pinpoint the inherent risks in the act of speaking *for* or *about* the Other: the denial of the informant's agency, the reinforcement of discursive hierarchies, and the legitimization of specific narrative-interpretive constructions of the world.

My proposal for a literary application emerges from the question of how positionality influences the production and reception of knowledge. As a researcher's prior worldview can influence and bias their work, it is reasonable to assume that significant repercussions also occur in narratives about the Other and the Self, depending on the specific position of the narrator—technically distinct from that of the author. The narrator's specific position—and the extent to which they are embedded within the social system they

[1] The English translations from Italian of the primary and secondary resources are by the author.

[2] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979), 11. See also: Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, 1993).

[3] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (editors), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory* (Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 66-111.

[4] Linda Alcoff, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', *Culture Critique*, 20 (1992), pp. 5-32.

describe—may thus contribute to legitimizing ideologically oriented readings of past events. These interpretations often reinforce already dominant narrative frames. This process is rarely merely intentional: even when ideological positions are articulated explicitly only in infrequent, overt 'non-narrative comments', this does not imply that the narrative itself is ideologically neutral or 'innocent'.[5] Rather, ideology tends to emerge almost inevitably when narrative production intersects with broader social and historical dynamics. A particularly relevant example concerns the construction and reshaping of national identity, where mechanisms of collective self-favoritism frequently come into play.[6]

For this reason, I aim to examine a specific dynamic: the relationship between the Italian doctor and the colonial Other, and the resulting construction of the self-image of Italians in the colonies as produced through literary representation. Specifically, my analysis focuses on how the position of the doctor-narrator and their inherent sense of mission intersect with memories of Italy's colonial past, considering three case studies published immediately after World War II—*Tam tam Mayumbe* (1950) by Gian Gaspare Napolitano,[7] *Il deserto della Libia* (1952) by Mario Tobino,[8] and *Un medico in Africa* (1952) by Alberto Denti di Pirajno.[9]

The case studies

The three case studies share common traits. Published in the aftermath of World War II and the loss of Italian colonies, they all feature doctors as both narrators and main characters, and are set in colonial Africa. The settings are not limited to territories formerly under Italian administration—Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia—but also include countries where an Italian presence was nonetheless documented, such as the Congo.[10] At the same time, the authors differ significantly in terms of both their personal experience of Africa and their political allegiances.

[5] Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto University Press, 2017), p. 23.

[6] Bruno M. Mazzara, *Appartenenza e pregiudizio. Psicologia sociale delle relazioni interetniche* (Carocci, 1998); Paolo Proietti, *Specchi del letterario. L'imagologia* (Sellerio, 2008).

[7] Gian Gaspare Napolitano, *Tam tam Mayumbe*, in Id., *La Mariposa* (Vallecchi, 1950), pp. 191-277.

[8] Mario Tobino, *Il deserto della Libia* [1952] *(con Il libro della Libia)* (Mondadori, 2011).

[9] Alberto Denti di Pirajno, *Un medico in Africa* [1952] (Longanesi, 1974).

[10] Carlo Carbone, *Italiani in Congo. Migranti, mercenari e imprenditori nel Novecento* (FrancoAngeli, 2019).

Gian Gaspare Napolitano (1907–1966) was a journalist, screenwriter, and writer. Initially aligned with fascism, he distanced himself from it in the early 1940s. As a reporter, he spent several months in the Belgian Congo during the 1930s—where decades earlier his father had worked on railway construction. Although his novel draws on knowledge from his time there, it remains a work of pure fiction.[11] Unlike Napolitano, Mario Tobino (1910–1991) was an ardent anti-fascist from a young age, a psychiatrist and writer. His African experience took place during World War II, when he served as a medical officer in the Italian army for a year and a half on the Libyan front. His largely autobiographical novel emerges directly from his desert war testimony and offers a sharp critique of the regime.[12] Lastly, Alberto Denti di Pirajno (1886–1968), despite holding numerous administrative roles alongside Duke Amedeo of Savoy, considered himself a doctor above all else. Always loyal to the monarchy and to the Duke, he combined his medical profession with colonial administrative duties in Libya and Italian East Africa from the 1920s until the British victory in North Africa (1943). His book emerges as a narrativized reworking of memories from his long medical and administrative experience.[13]

Their works are thus likely to mirror the diversity of settings and the authors' biographical backgrounds, resulting in a multifaceted—rather than uniform—representation of the Italian presence in Africa. Yet the specific features of the Italian postwar context also play a role in shaping—and to some extent orienting—the ways in which both the national past and the colonizer-colonized relationship are reworked.

THE CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION

[11] Plot of *Tam tam Mayumbe*: The narrator — an Italian doctor — listens to a younger colleague recount the tragic story of a sexual triangle. After discovering the secret affair, Martinez, a powerful Portuguese mestizo, killed his lover, the black servant Madalena, and his accountant, the Belgian Van Vaerten. Martinez is finally captured by the Belgians with the support of the natives, while the young doctor Alessandrini admits to the narrator that he too had slept with Madalena.

[12] Plot of *Il deserto della Libia*: The story, largely autobiographical, follows the events of an Italian army medical unit engaged on the North African front during the war. During their stay at the oasis of Sorman and in Tripoli, the medical officers interact with the local population. Despite their peaceful daily coexistence, underlying tensions are perceptible. Approaching the real war front in Tobruk, Italians face for the first time the reality of war and death.

[13] Plot of *Un medico in Africa*: The narrative retraces the autobiographical experience of the author-narrator in the Italian colonies in Africa. The most pages are devoted to anecdotes related to his medical work, as well as to individual local figures known during those years, sometimes highlighting their qualities, sometimes their exoticism or vices attributed to their ethnicity. The genuine interest he shows towards colonial Otherness seems, however, balanced by a veiled civilizing paternalism.

Though the authors' African experiences predate the loss of the colonies, their texts were elaborated and published afterward. Tangible interests in the former colonies had not entirely vanished, considering Italy's diplomatic attempts to secure trusteeship mandates in Libya—which failed—and Somalia—which succeeded, lasting until 1960—, whereas Ethiopian independence was immediately acknowledged.[14]

Moreover, after World War II, the myth of Italians as *brava gente* ('good people') gained increasing traction in public opinion, especially by framing Germans as the sole perpetrators of wartime atrocities, thereby omitting Italian responsibilities.[15] A specific ethical ideal of Italianness emerged as a shared premise through which to construct the identity of the new Republican Italian. In opposition to fascist virilism, Italians were portrayed as fundamentally humane, uncorrupted by fascism or racial policies.[16] Elements of the fascist and colonial past were thus excluded or reshaped within institutionalized collective memory, producing selective amnesia or dissemination.[17]

Given the role of memory in shaping a community's identity, it is reasonable to argue that this memorial reconfiguration answered a national need to redefine identity after the trauma of defeat and the dictatorship's collapse.[18] Furthermore, the witness role became indispensable, seen as the only historically legitimate informant in public opinion.[19]

---

[14] Angelo Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani* (Laterza, 1992); Antonio Maria Morone, *L'ultima colonia. Come l'Italia è tornata in Africa 1950-1960* (Laterza, 2011).

[15] David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Il Saggiatore, 1994); Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire* (Neri Pozza, 2005); Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Laterza, 2018).

[16] Silvana Patriarca, *Italianità. La costruzione del carattere della nazione* (Laterza, 2011).

[17] Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds.), *Italian Colonialism. Legacy and Memory* (Peter Lang, 2005); Gianmarco Mancosu, 'Amnesia, Aphasia and Amnesty: The Articulations of Italian Colonial Memory in Postwar Films (1946–1960)', *Modern Italy*, 26, 4 (2021), pp. 387-408; Alessandro Pes, 'Discorso pubblico e stereotipo del «buon colonizzatore». Le istituzioni italiane e il passato coloniale', *Memoria e ricerca*, 2 (2023), pp. 255-274.

[18] See: Guido Bartolini, *The Italian Literature of the Axis War. Memory of Self-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); James V. Wertsch, *How Nations Remember. A Narrative Approach* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[19] As Cristina Baldassini argues, at least until the early 1960s the autobiographical dimension of the witness's experience often reinforced biased narratives aimed at a sanitised rewriting of the recent fascist and colonial past. Within public opinion, such narratives were able to compete, in terms of public legitimacy, with the documentary approach of professional historians [Cristina Baldassini, *L'ombra di Mussolini. L'Italia moderata e la memoria del fascismo (1945-1960)* (Rubbettino, 2008), 143]. The figure of the witness continued to play a crucial role in shaping the memory of the colonial past well into the 1980s and 1990s, when a highly influential journalist such as Indro Montanelli persistently denied the use of mustard gas in Ethiopia solely on the grounds that he had not personally witnessed its

Personal and common memory—universally relatable and compatible—contributed to socialized, shared memory.[20]

The subject's positionality plays a fundamental role in the act of remembering and forgetting. When individual and public dimensions overlap within a literary-textual apparatus through which memory is filtered, the concept of narrative positionality proves particularly useful. Positionality does not merely reflect an individual worldview; it also encompasses relational, material, and symbolic interests embedded within power dynamics that may remain concealed.[21] This concept therefore goes beyond authorial positionality alone, integrating it with that of the narrator-focalizer of the narrative. The narrator's social role shapes the conceptualization and evaluation of events, while their narrative function grants their personal ideology interpretive authority for the reader[22]—even as the text may at the same time stage their unreliability in representing the past.[23]

By conveying memory through literary works, narrative performance and personal remembrance intersect. The narrator's position entails a preexisting, ideologically biased perception shaped by personal beliefs and socialized expectations, often unchallenged. In representing and interacting with other actors, a homodiegetic narrator with specific relational connotations—such as the European doctor in the colony—thus has repercussions on the narrative and, ultimately, on the construction of a transmissible image of the past. The notion of narrative positionality thus restores categories such as the "unreliable narrator" and the "ideological point of view" to their public dimension, foregrounding their relational, discursive, and social implications,[24] which stem from the narrator's personal value system and involvement in the events.[25]

---

deployment, despite extensive documentary evidence to the contrary [Angelo Del Boca, *I gas di Mussolini. Il fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia* (Editori Riuniti, 2007), 147-177; Sandro Gerbi and Raffaele Liucci, *Lo stregone. La prima vita di Indro Montanelli* (Einaudi, 2006), 35-37].

[20] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 15.

[21] See: Sun Yee Yip, 'Positionality and Reflexivity: Negotiating Insider-Outsider Positions Within and Across Cultures', *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 47, 3 (2024), pp. 222-232, https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2023.2266375; Jasmine K Gani & Rabea M Kahn, 'Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 68.2 (June 2024), pp. 1-13, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae038.

[22] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary Poetics* (Routledge, 1983), p. 81.

[23] Bal, *Narratology*, p. 145.

[24] Susan Snieder Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton University Press, 1981).

[25] Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, p. 100.

When the narrator is an Italian doctor engaging with the colonized, such an underlying narrative situationality thus intervenes in postwar representations of the past precisely because of the narrator's positional specificity. His interaction with colonial Otherness is doubly marked: by the colonizer/colonized dialectic and by the sense of purpose attached to the medical mission. Yet, despite its apparently humanitarian and benevolent impetus, the figure of the European doctor can also function as a device of discipline and political control within the African, colonial context.[26]

Medical mission and the risk of contamination

For the colonial administration, the presence of European humanitarian doctors serves as a tool of indirect and informal surveillance over territories that are otherwise difficult for governmental authorities to control.[27] The medical status grants trust and respect among indigenous populations, as happens with the narrator of Napolitano's *Tam tam Mayumbe*. The locals mistake his medical knowledge for witchcraft and call him the '*Na' fumu mundele Munganga*', or 'Great White Sorcerer'.[28] This recognition not only compensates for a lifestyle perceived as inferior compared to his brilliant past in Europe; more importantly, it confirms the construction of his self-image as a savior. From this role derives the legitimacy of his presence in the Congo. Yet, within the Belgian colonial context, the Italian doctor occupies an interstitial position as a foreigner: although socially superior to the indigenous population, he remains subordinate within the colonial hierarchy, while still being functional to territorial control and therefore tolerated.

[26] Significantly, the authors display various degrees of complicity with the colonial system and different levels of positional overlap with their narrators. As an author, Napolitano diverges from his narrator; nevertheless, through this narrative mediation he is likely to articulate positions critical of the colonial practices of other national powers and to give voice to his own racial concerns. Tobino's experience as an antifascist, as well as his service as a military doctor during the Second World War, suggests a partial overlap between author and narrator, particularly with regard to judgments about Libyans and critiques of fascism. However, the mirroring effect established between the author and the character of Marcello complicates any straightforward positional coincidence with the narrator, who tends to remain in the background as a mere observer of events. By contrast, Pirajno's role as both physician and colonial administrator entails an explicit autobiographical coincidence with the position of his narrator, in whom the mirroring is complete and plausibly functional to a strategy of positive self-representation.

[27] Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills. Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

[28] Napolitano, *Tam tam Mayumbe*, p. 215.

However, the narrator's personal worries undermine his sense of mission. He discredits the medical actions of the Egyptian humanitarian doctor Tefik-bey[29] and of local healers[30] since their incompetence risks damaging the credibility of the narrator's medical science.

The clash between local and Italian medicine—considered as the only true science—emerges when the doctor reproaches the tribal chief Gombà, suffering from elephantiasis, for following the village healer's advice instead of the Italian narrator's:

> ««Gombà», gli dissi, «hai preso la medicina del tuo stregone, eh?».
>
> Il re mi rispose con un gran silenzio.
>
> «Non credi più alla mia *majele*?»[31]

Exploiting local superstitions and the assumed overlap between science and magic within the indigenous epistemological framework, the narrator claims exclusive healing authority for Western medicine—especially when it proves unexpectedly effective. This strategy serves to re-establish trust in his 'magic' over local forms of knowledge,[32] while simultaneously reversing the power relations between doctor and tribal chief to his own exclusive advantage. Whereas the tribal chief addresses the Italian doctor using his honorific title, the narrator calls him simply by name, thus reinforcing colonial hierarchies. In the narrator's personal interpretation of his civilizing mission, white saviorism and racial superiority converge. Only the doctor's self-attributed salvific morality allows him to tolerate the Africans.[33]

These contradictions fully emerge after hearing the account of his young colleague Alessandrini regarding the events that led the Portuguese mixed-race man Martinez to murder his black servant-lover Madalena and his Belgian accountant Van Vaerten. Although as a humanitarian doctor he is ostensibly tasked with caring for indigenous populations, the narrator remains anchored to a racially structured colonial worldview:

[29] Ibid., p. 206.
[30] Ibid., pp. 224-225.
[31] Ibid., p. 224.
[32] Ibid., p. 226.
[33] See: 'Il mio primo istinto, quando ascolto parlare un negro, è di non credergli, non credergli mai', Ibid., p. 225.

> «[sono] personalmente contrario a mischiare i negri e le tribù negli affari dei bianchi, e quel che è peggio a farli strumenti della nostra giustizia, venendo così a riconoscere, in certo qual modo, che per amministrarla è necessario il loro aiuto [...]»[34]

Involving indigenous people in Martinez's capture would imply acknowledging their agency—an idea that is incompatible with the colonial order. However, political participation by the colonized is not the narrator's sole discomfort; interethnic contamination is perceived as even more troubling.

Alessandrini confesses not only to having letting Martinez escape out of empathy for his grief[35] but also to having been sexually overtaken by Madalena[36]—pathologically displacing violence and sexual impulsiveness onto the woman in order to evade direct responsibility.[37] The narrator scolds him, reminding him that Madalena was 'nient'altro che una negra, e che come tale andava trattata, e che in Africa una negra è una negra e un bianco è un bianco, e guai a far confusioni, crear compromessi'.[38] While he formally condemns interracial sexual unions, the narrator nonetheless reveals an inherent colonial 'ambivalence':[39] ultimately, he cannot truly judge his fellow Italian for exercising his positional privilege. Moreover, the very existence of Martinez—and the fascination he exerts over the two Italian doctors—stems precisely from that racial confusion and contamination the Italian doctor should refuse. The mixed-race man's inherent social danger[40] finds its culmination in his gravest crime: killing a white Belgian, while belonging fully neither to Africa nor to Europe. From the narrative perspective, only the murder of Van Vaerten is condemned, unlike Madalena's death.[41]

---

[34] Ibid., p. 264.

[35] Ibid., pp. 267-270.

[36] Aligning with the stereotypical colonial representation, Madalena is a subaltern woman who does not speak, representing the embodied site of both sexual desire and of Africa itself. She speaks for the first and only time as she is dying, uttering '*Munganga*' ['Sorcerer'] in search of salvation through a magical and superstitious conception of medicine (260)

[37] See: 'Quella negra era una forza naturale, scatenata; la stessa natura dell'Africa, prepotente e insaziabile, distruggitrice di maschi. Tutti voleva avere, e ci ebbe tutti.' (p. 267).

[38] Ibid., p. 271.

[39] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

[40] Francesco Casales, *Raccontare l'Oltremare. Storia del romanzo coloniale italiano (1913-1943)* (Le Monnier, 2023), pp. 189-198; Chiara Volpato, 'La violenza contro le donne nelle colonie italiane. Prospettive psicosociali di analisi', *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista tematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, 10 (2009), pp. 110-131.

[41] See: '[...] Martinez è uno straniero che ha ucciso un bianco, e per di più un belga, ma che lui stesso non è neppure un bianco vero e proprio, ma un meticcio (Napolitano, *Tam tam Mayumbe*, p. 264).

In Napolitano's *Tam tam Mayumbe*, the doctor's position intertwines the idea of civilizing and healing missions with the fear of contamination—racial, political, and moral. While his humanitarian engagement legitimizes the idea of a benevolent Italian presence in Africa, the doctor-narrator's claims and concerns remain uncritically rooted in a racialized, biologistic discursive system. Furthermore, precisely because he is not directly involved in colonial administration, he implicitly highlights the limits of the Belgian colonial model: the need to resort — even exceptionally — to indigenous support appears as a sign of weakness, thereby reinforcing the alleged superiority of the Italian segregationist model. The narrative therefore reveals deeply contradictory impulses operating beneath an apparently humanitarian discourse.

MEDICINE AND THE ROLE OF THE COLONIZER

Humanitarian acts initially serve to mask power asymmetries also in *Il deserto della Libia*, where the internal narrator is a doctor in the medical unit yet remains a spectator, never directly involved in
events. Autobiographical and fictional dimensions overlap in the novel. Tobino first collected thoughts and impressions from his experience on the Libyan warfront in an unpublished manuscript, Il libro della Libia, later reworked into the published version. Whereas the original draft contained sharper criticism of the fascist regime, Il deserto della Libia emphasizes the desert as a fictionalized environment—empty and immobile—mirroring the distressing situation of the Italian army in Libya. This element further complicates the position of the author and that of the narrator-spectator, which tend to merge in those passages derived from the original journal.

However, the role of the doctor in a colonial context apparently influences how medical officers are introduced as charitable saviors of colonial subjects, in line with a positive portrayal of the Italian presence in Africa:

> Moltissimi arabi hanno il tracoma, che è una malattia degli occhi, che porta alla cecità. Il giorno dopo che arrivammo, il maggiore, che era oculista, vedendo un bambino col tracoma, lo cominciò a curare. Il bambino migliorò. La notizia si sparse nell'oasi. Oltre il maggiore c'erano alla sezione altri medici. Cominciarono a presentarsi arabi per farsi curare.[42]

This seemingly selfless desire to provide care—particularly to children—helps gain trust and acceptance from Libyans, even though the doctors' presence is factually tied to the broader context of global conflict. Despite the war context, doctors remain privileged

[42] Tobino, *Il deserto della Libia*, p. 14.

figures when it comes to engaging with the local population, since they are portrayed solely as bearers of healing rather than of death, unlike soldiers.

The medical role in wartime Libya represents therefore not merely an autobiographical element. It also serves a narrative function, through which the novel exposes problematic relational dynamics within the colonial framework. The trust cultivated by the doctors in the oasis of Sorman enables the friendship between the Italian Marcello and the Arab patrician Mahmud—regarded as the only fully remarkable Arab because of his interest in European world. Despite their mutual curiosity about each other's cultures, the positional dynamics of the colonial relationship soon emerge. Upon discovering that a woman described as 'a beauty straight out of *One Thousand and One Nights*'—[43]a clear projection of the Italian orientalist imagination—[44]lives in Mahmud's house, Marcello views his friend as a means to fulfill his desire.

The doctor then exploits both his medical knowledge and Mahmud's trust to deceive the Libyan man. During a medical examination of some of Mahmud's female relatives—namely, his niece, wife and sister-in-law—, Marcello fantasizes about being erotically seduced by the three women while admiring and touching their naked bodies. His gaze on colonized femininity coincides with that of the colonizer. Although it remains merely voyeuristic, the erotic dimension of the literary representation becomes a metaphor of consensual domination, reinforcing pre-existing power hierarchies.[45] Yet, to suppress guilt and responsibility, he convinces himself that it was merely a 'sweet jest' between friends, and that, actually, Mahmud had deliberately shown the doctor his own 'harem'.[46]

Colonial factuality and inherent positional power dynamics overdetermine both men.[47] Assuming Mahmud's resignation to subordination is a necessary precondition for their friendship. This premise is eventually challenged when Marcello encounters Mahmud giving a speech at the market denouncing the Italian occupation:

---

[43] Ibid., p. 65.

[44] Dagmar Reichardt, ' La presenza subalterna in Italia e la scrittura come terapia', *Incontri. Rivista europea di studi italiani*, 28, 1 (2013), pp. 16-24 (p. 20), doi:10.18352/incontri.9140.; Silvia Lutzoni, 'Tra mito e realtà. La Libia di Tobino' in *I cantieri dell'italianistica. Ricerca, didattica e organizzazione agli inizi del XXI secolo*, ed. by B. Alfonzetti, G. Baldassari and F. Tomasi (Adi editore, 2014), pp. 1-7 (p. 6), http://www.italianisti.it/Atti-diCongresso?pg=cms&ext=p&cms_codsec=14&cms_codcms=581.

[45] Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (University of California Press, 2010), p. 44.

[46] Tobino, *Il deserto della Libia*, p. 70.

[47] Antonio Schiavulli, 'Infiniti pensieri italiani', *Nuova rivista letteraria*, 5 (2012), pp. 26-29.

> Solo uno che è stato sotto la tirannia può con un lampo capire e soffrire certi aspetti e subito vergognarsene, accorgendosi di aver cambiato improvvisamente la sua parte. Infatti Marcello in quel momento era lo straniero, colui che domina, che ha l'uniforme del suo tiranno.
>
> [...] non era, come avrebbe amato, in quel luogo come un sereno spettatore, ma era e restava un italiano con il suo passato, la storia del suo paese e personale, era un attore, un vivo attore del suo tempo e la guerra, anche se non appariva ufficialmente, era proprio tra lui e Mahmùd [...].[48]

Their friendship proves impossible. Despite personal similarities and apparent mutual understanding, coloniality overrides the individuals. In Libya, Marcello is not merely an anti-fascist living under a dictatorship—he is a colonizer in a colony. Within these power dynamics, his position is reversed. He cannot experience the colony as a mere spectator or tourist, since from Libyans' perspective he remains nothing but a colonizer.[49] Orientalist imagery and unequal power relations shape his approach to Otherness. This awareness produces a rejection of his role, which is incompatible with both the myth of the 'good Italians' he wishes to represent and with his personal ethics—that shared by the character, the narrator and the author. Yet this refusal culminates in a retreat from the unsettling context. Following the episode, the narrative abandons the oasis setting and shifts focus to the topics of war and death, supplanting the colonial theme.[50]

Although autobiographical, the story told by a doctor who focuses on other Italian doctors carries public implications. Portraying the medics as altruistic saviors enables the partial omission of the military reasons behind Italian presence in Libya. Furthermore, it emphasizes the national postwar self-image of Italians as inherently humane people and colonizers. Yet the antifascist doctor's position, once applied to interpersonal relations, opens up a critical reflection. Despite their rejection of the colonial role, both Marcello and the narrator end up being unable to completely reject Italian colonial system, at least in its potentiality. The parallel drawn between the Italian medical lieutenant under fascism and Mahmud's under Italian colonial rule seems to suggest that only Mussolini's regime is to blame for the suffering of both Italians and Libyans.[51] Thus, in *Il deserto della Libia*, Italians are portrayed both as saviors of the Arabs and as victims on par with the colonized.

---

[48] Tobino, *Il deserto della Libia*, pp. 74-75.

[49] Albert Memmi, *Ritratto del colonizzato e del colonizzatore* (Liguori, 1979).

[50] Tobino, *Il deserto della Libia*, pp. 77-167.

[51] Silvia Caserta, 'Memory and Representations of the Colonial Experience in Italian Literature', *Kult. Beyond the empires*, 12 (2015), pp. 52-66 (p. 60); Michele Baldaro, 'War and Colony. Empathy and

DOCTOR OR ADMINISTRATOR. THE CIVILIZING MISSION

Since author and narrator explicitly coincide, Pirajno's work is arguably the most contradictory in articulating the motivations animating the narrative. *Un medico in Africa* stems from a twenty-year experience not only as a doctor but also as a colonial administrator. This dual role results in diverging perspectives on the colonial world.

The narrator reveals a genuine desire to understand and engage with the Otherness, learning local languages and avoiding overtly exotic portrayals.[52] Numerous pages are devoted to his free medical clinic and to the many local figures he encounters and treats during his years in Libya and Italian East Africa. He does not dismiss traditional or tropical medicine as mere superstition, or judge those who naively place their faith in magic or divine intervention rather than in science.[53] He is even fascinated by the performance of a famous scorpion enchantress he hears about.[54] Yet, the narrator's medical mission remains the priority over his ethnological, touristic and administrative interests:

> È stato già osservato come tra la missione del medico e quella del prete esistano molte affinità e non a caso dell'arte sanitaria si dice che è un sacerdozio. Tanto al medico che al prete gli uomini si rivolgono in un'ora di crisi; entrambi promettono la salvezza: il primo in questo mondo, il secondo nell'altro. [...] sia il sacerdote che il medico restano sempre tali anche se il prete getta la tonaca alle ortiche o se eventi successive portano il medico in campi diversi da quello della medicina. *Semel abbas, semper abbas*.[55]

Though he eventually assumes administrative duties within the colonial apparatus, he primarily identifies as a doctor. His medical mission explicitly overlaps with the aims of Catholic missionary associations, resulting in a paternalistic stance toward the colonized. As well as the missionaries, Pirajno was a man of his time—likely animated by sincere

Ambivalence in the Setting of Mario Tobino's Libya', *Close Encounters In War Journal*, 7 (2024), pp. 12-41 (pp. 32-33).

[52] Marianna Scarfone, 'Alberto Denti di Pirajno: medico, funzionario, scrittore', in *Governare l'Oltremare. Istituzioni, funzionari e società nel colonialismo italiano,* ed. by G. Dore, C. Giorgi, A.M. Morone and M. Zaccaria (Carocci, 2013), pp. 103-115.

[53] Denti di Pirajno, *Un medico in Africa*, pp. 67-72.

[54] Ibid., pp. 31-36.

[55] Ibid., p. 273.

humanitarian spirit, yet equally convinced of his cultural superiority within a civilizing framework.[56]

In constructing his self-image as a doctor, the narrator thus emphasizes his qualities as a 'good Italian', revered by his loyal *ascaro* Gemberié[57] and capable of resisting female charms and the gifts of African chiefs.[58] However, when the doctor's role shifts to that of the colonial official, clichés and facile exoticism occur—such as when a manhunt for outlaws in Ethiopia morphs into an elephant hunt with adventurous and exoticist overtones.[59]

Yet, while he is writing, the world has dramatically changed. Nostalgia and regret filter the view on the colonial past. In the opening pages, the narrator-doctor laments the loss of the early 'pioneer' settlers in contrast to the 'bourgeois' administrator imposed during the Fascist period.[60] Upon the surrender and handover of Tripoli to the British, instead, the narrator-administrator claims the moral distinctiveness of Italian colonialism:

> Ma oltre che da un complesso di inferiorità la linea di condotta dell'amministrazione britannica era dettata da concezioni assolutamente estranee a quelle che avevano costantemente informato gli atti dell'amministrazione coloniale alla quale appartenevo: un'amministrazione che sempre aveva considerate le popolazioni coloniali come aggregate da guidare a forme superiori e più civili di esistenza, e mai come armenti umani da sfruttare.[61]

In defeat, the narrator-administrator overcomes the narrator-doctor, and becomes the spokesperson for a sanitized and overly idealized image of benevolent Italian colonialism. The Italian colonial enterprise is framed as fundamentally in opposition to the plutocratic and exploitive logics attributed British rule. Pirajno draws on the recurring theme of colonial resentment toward the other European powers—prominent in fascist propaganda and later reactivated in postwar Italian public opinion—thus fostering a self-absolving interpretation of Italy's African experience.[62] National colonialism is presented as driven by a sincere humanitarian and civilizing mission, purportedly for the benefit of the

[56] Silvia Forni, 'Racconti e immagini d'Africa. I missionari della Consolata in Kenya e in Etiopia (1902-1942)', in *Permanenze e metamorfosi dell'immaginario coloniale in Italia*, ed. by E. Castelli and D. Laurenzi (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2000), pp. 319-336.

[57] Denti di Pirajno, *Un medico in Africa*, pp. 54-67.

[58] Ibid., pp. 273-289.

[59] Ibid., pp. 182-204.

[60] Ibid., pp. 2-5.

[61] Ibid., pp. 300.

[62] Gianmarco Mancosu, 'Risentimento coloniale. I "nemici" dell'Italia e la retorica sul ritorno in Africa (1946-1960), *Diacronie. Studi di storia contemporanea*, 45 (2021), pp. 2-17.

colonized. The medical mission thus converts into an *ex post* justification for military conquest, lending humanitarian legitimacy to a system based on indigenous exploitation—that is, colonization.[63]

Despite the apparent prominence granted to local populations, in this memoir the central figure remains the one who remembers: the narrator—as a doctor and administrator. His personal beliefs and his administrative role in the colonial government shape both the narrative and the conveyed memory. As in the literary works previously discussed, *Un medico in Africa* presents the doctor as the best representative of the 'good Italian colonialism'—attentive to every aspect of local culture, life and population. His role is instinctively missionary. Nevertheless, his curiosity also functions as a tool of colonial control—an element persistently present in the text, even when elided. Although the colonial doctor's actions can be genuinely disinterested, they nevertheless remain 'an integral part of colonization, of domination, of exploitation',[64] fully embedded in an oppressive, segregationist social system of which he is also a representative.[65] His personal humanitarian aspirations collide with the underlying colonial framework, yet at the same time allow for the assertion of a positive remembrance of the colonial past.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

When recounting the past, memory assumes specific and individual forms which—once situated within a broader and shared framework—contribute to reinforcing the dominant memory narrative. Memory cannot be considered neutral; rather, it actively participates in the construction and restructuring of a collective national identity. In postwar Italy, the myth of the 'good Italian' emerges as a dominant paradigm for reinterpreting and recollecting a complex and contested past. By distancing Italians from fascism and presenting Italian colonialism as inherently benevolent, political and diplomatic contradictions toward the former colonies are ethically resolved through this reinterpreted collective, shared memory.

Within the literary works analyzed, the figure of the Italian colonial doctor is particularly revealing of the ambiguities inherent in the act of remembering national past

[63] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (Grove Press, 1965), p. 122.

[64] Ibid., p. 134

[65] Ibid., p. 121. See also: Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, 'From Warriors to Urban Dwellers. Ascari and the Military Factor in Urban Development of Colonial Eritrea', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 175 (2004), pp. 533-574.

and conveying its literary image. Depicted through selfless acts of care and personal initiative to support colonized populations, the doctor's figure encourages a salvific self-representation that facilitates the acceptance of both the colonizer and the colonial system—thus legitimizing the presence of domination, while leaving mechanisms of social control largely invisible in the narrative.

Moreover, the three literary works reproduce stereotyped representations. Napolitano channels colonial fears of racial contamination; Tobino articulates a voyeuristic, eroticizing gaze that objectifies the colonized; Pirajno proudly and paternalistically asserts the right to complete an unfinished civilizing mission. By foregrounding the Italian doctor, colonial and military discourse absorb humanitarian rhetoric, masking asymmetries of power and presenting colonization as a necessary intervention for the benefit of the colonized—an humanitarian re-framing of occupation.[66] These elements highlight how, even in the postwar period, Italian perceptions of Africa remain entrenched in colonial power structures and regimes of representation, deeply tied to positional relations between colonizer and colonized.

In the postwar context, personal and social dimensions are therefore deeply intertwined in the narrative position of the doctor in colonies: at a personal level, the narrator confronts his conscience and the contradictions of his role; at a social level, the narrative functions as a device to legitimize the colonial past, often sanitizing its deplorable traits. This inescapable coloniality[67] of memory illustrates the difficulty of disentangling from power structures that shaped Italian and European history.

Finally, viewing literary production as a symptomatic expression of socialized urges requires careful attention to the narrator's ideological and relational position, which does not necessarily coincide with that of the author. Narrative positionality is not here merely descriptive, but constitutive of how colonial memory is produced, circulated, and naturalized. Only through such a critical approach can the narrative, cultural and materialist apparatuses underpinning specific memorial transmissions be demystified, opening the way to a critical and aware reading of the colonial past—a past that continues to influence the present.

[66] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008), p. 65.

[67] Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018).