

## FOOD AND IDENTITY IN LAILA WADIA AND IGIABA SCEGO

### *Comida e identidad en Laila Wadia e Igiaba Scego*

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RESUMEN: A través de relatos de Laila Wadia e Igiaba Scego, se analizarán las posibles relaciones entre comida e identidades en la literatura de migración italiana. ¿Es posible construir, cambiar, esconder o enseñar a los demás una identidad comprando salchichas o cocinando pollo al curry? ¿Es la comida necesariamente expresión de una cultura o es simplemente un factor de integración, una forma de pertenecer a una cultura? ¿Y esta «identidad culinaria» nos identifica de verdad? Según los principios de la Ayurveda, somos lo que comemos. Pero también es verdad que comemos lo que somos, en el sentido de que lo que comemos está estrictamente relacionado con nuestra cultura. Además, en el contexto de la literatura de migración, hay que añadir que comemos lo que nos gustaría ser.

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*Palabras clave:* Pluri-Identidades, Comida y Cultura, Discurso Étnico, Literatura de Migración, Literatura Transeuropea.

**ABSTRACT:** Through the accounts of Laila Wadia and Igiaba Scego the possible relationships between food and identity in Italian migration literature are analysed. Can we construct, change, hide or show others an identity by buying sausages or cooking chicken curry? Is food necessarily an expression of a culture or is it simply a factor in integration, a sense of belonging to a culture? And does this 'culinary identity' really identify us? According to the principles of Ayurveda, we are what we eat. But it is also true that we eat what we are, in the sense that what we eat is loaded with cultural connotations. Furthermore, in the context of migrant literature, it seems worthwhile to add that we eat what we would like to be.

*Key words:* Pluri-Identity, Food-Culture, Ethnic Discourse, Migrant Literature, Trans-European Literature.

The topic of my research is female migrant literature, a phenomenon which is growing continuously both in Italy (where I come from) and in Spain (where I live and work at the moment). Nevertheless, in these two countries it has not yet received the attention it deserves, as it has in other countries where this phenomenon has already been studied and analysed. Within this literary current, I will concentrate briefly on some aspects of the relationship between food and identity. These two concepts, food and identity, often go hand in hand in literature, particularly in migrant literature, where this relationship appears as one of its most salient features.

For a long time, the relationship between nutrition and identity, be it cultural or personal, has been a matter of interest for anthropologists as well as psychologists and sociologists, who have tried to define the effects of food on the human psyche. One need only think of the works of Freud, Jung, Lacan and Feuerbach, to name but a few. According to the principles of Ayurveda, we are what we eat (Gabaccia 2000). But it is also true that we eat what we are, in the sense that what we eat is loaded with cultural connotations. Furthermore, in the context of migrant literature (as we will see in the texts that I analyse), it seems worthwhile to add that we eat what we would like to be.

One could start by saying that food is life. Food is a primordial, vital element, and as such, it assumes a great psychological importance. It is a part of the imprinting, or rather, it is the imprinting, the first mark, which is given to us and which remains imprinted on our lives, even if we are not

always aware of it. Therefore food becomes a symbol of regression to our primordial needs and that is why certain dishes can take on a symbolical value for each of us. This value goes far beyond that of the food itself, and crosses into the unconscious. Food thus becomes nutrition, something that nourishes our bodies right from birth and accustoms us to certain rhythms, odours and flavours.

But food represents not only physical, but also mental nutrition. In a wider sense, the nutrition that food conveys to us is, above all, of a cultural type. Each time we find ourselves gathered around a table, we gain access into the tradition of a culture and its patrimony. As a matter of fact, the word «patrimony» derives from the latin *pater* meaning «father» and, indeed, it stands for the goods possessed by a person (e.g. father) and handed to somebody else, who in turn must pass them on again. On the other hand, the word «tradition» comes from «trans-dare», to hand over, to transmit, to deliver. In fact, it stands for a transmission over the course of time, like that of stories and tales handed on orally from one generation to another in the past (or in the present, as it still happens in some cultures). In the same way, culinary culture acts as a means of transmitting human knowledge. Moreover, «transmit» is a verb that implies a moral duty. The idea is that we are depositaries, because somebody before us has deposited in us certain things which we should then pass on to somebody else. The process forms part of the continuity of life, as can be seen in the example of a grandmother as the sole keeper of a secret recipe. One day, the grandmother will call somebody into the kitchen to pass on her knowledge so that it will not be lost with her. In Italian, you say *passare il mestolo*, literally «to pass on the wooden spoon» when an elder mother, a matron, gives way in the kitchen to a daughter, a daughter-in-law, or to a grand-daughter and teaches her all her knowledge, all her best recipes. In this way, food, and in particular, food vocabulary, come to be used metaphorically to describe other aspects of life. Food comes to be a vessel of meanings, a sort of Pandora's box of emotional connotations.

To explore this tension, I have chosen to compare a story by Laila Wadia, born in India but resident in Italy for many years, and one by Igiaba Scego, born in Italy to Somali parents. The aim is to trace possible differences between first and second generation immigrants, and to generate reflection which itself brings many questions: Can we construct, change, hide or show others an identity by buying sausages or cooking chicken curry? Is food necessarily an expression of a culture or is it simply a factor in integration, a sense of belonging to a culture? And does this culinary identity really identify us? The respective titles of these stories, «Curry di pollo» and «Salsicce» already make evident the extent to which food is

the physical, but more importantly, the psychological object around which these tales revolve. In her story, «Salsicce», Igiaba Scego recounts the path of a Muslim Somali girl in Rome, who wants to buy and eat sausages for the first time in her life, with the goal of self-integration, to completely embrace the culture in which she lives. She believes that taking this action will help her to no longer feel different, allowing her to resolve her own identity problems; however, soon she is attacked by feelings of guilt, making her realise that hers is no more than a forced attitude which can bring about only superficial and provisional results.

Laila Wadia's «Curry di pollo», on the other hand, follows the course of a Milanese adolescent of Indian origin, who must come to terms with her own parents' strong attachment to their roots. When the girl decides to invite the boy whom she is secretly dating and another girlfriend to her house for lunch, she begs her mother to cook pasta. Indeed, pasta: the typical dish *par excellence* of the Italian tradition and, as such, a clear signal of integration, the very integration which she, unlike her own parents, feels necessary to display. Although the mother serves pasta to satisfy her daughter, during the meal, the father begins to praise the magnificent chicken curry which his wife often prepares. In this way, it comes to light that this dish would have been far more appreciated by the two Italian teenagers. To better clarify some elements of these two stories, I will analyse some parts of the texts, beginning with Igiaba Scego's work. The story «Salsicce» begins with the following: «Oggi, mercoledì 14 agosto, ore 9 e 30, mi è accaduto un fatto strambo. Per ragioni mie e ancora poco chiare ho comprato una grande quantità di salsicce» (Scego 2006, 23).

We see that from the start, it is the narrator herself who makes us perceive this incident as unusual. Already at the beginning, then, we foresee the sense of guilt which is later reaffirmed in the text with the expression *la voglia di peccare* or the desire to sin. Even when the protagonist dares to buy the meat, she does not manage to tell the shop owner, who recognises her and thus also knows her origins and habits, that the sausages are for her. The shop owner, in fact, is astonished by the request and so, begins to ask the girl a series of questions regarding this unexpected demand. As a result, the girl feels that she is committing a sin, and unable to overcome this emotional block, she ends up lying, replying to the shop owner: «Sono per la vicina» (They are for the neighbour). Back at home, she is overwhelmed by indecision: she does not know if, or how, to cook these sausages, which are so far removed from her own culture. Suddenly, she is reminded of a time when her mother, by mistake, bought pickles stuffed with pork frankfurters, with the result that the family was made to vomit the entire meal. Nonetheless, she tries to force herself as she believes that

identity, and a sense of belonging to a group, forms through food, the social element (and element of socialisation) *par excellence*.

In each place and every culture, the eating and sharing of food has always created empathy and a sense of belonging among individuals. In fact, the word *convivio* in Italian, meaning conviviality or merrymaking, derives etymologically from *cum-vivere*, to live together, and it is precisely the act of sharing (*condividere* in Italian) this daily action which transforms food from a nutritional object into a cultural element. Just when the girl feels convinced of the choice she is about to make, she begins to ask herself: «Ma ne vale veramente la pena? Se mi ingoio le salsicce una a una, la gente lo capirà che sono italiana come loro? Identica a loro? O sarà stata una bravata inutile?» (Scego 2006, 26).

Another flashback brings the girl to her childhood when others stupidly asked: «Ami più l'Italia o la Somalia?» («Which do you love more, Italy or Somalia?»), as if she should have had to choose between the two nations in order to feel better about herself. Her conclusion is: «Non sono un 100% non lo sono mai stata e non credo che riuscirò a diventarlo ora. Credo di essere una donna senza identità. O meglio con più identità» (Scego 2006, 28).

At the end, she does not eat the sausages and even with her doubts, she understands and accepts her own identity as multiple, and so begins to list the various things that make her feel Somali or Italian, many of which are tied to food:

Mi sento somala quando: 1) bevo il tè con il cardamomo, i chiodi di garofano e la cannella [...].

Mi sento italiana quando: 1) faccio una colazione dolce; [...] 5) mangio un gelato (Scego 2006, 29).

She seems, however, to still experience identity as a problem when, finally, she exclaims: «Un bel problema l'identità. E se l'abolissimo?» (Scego 2006, 29); («A real problem, identity. And if we abolished it?»). Just like the beginning of «Salsicce», the opening of «Curry di pollo» is already charged with meaning:

A volte vorrei essere orfana. È una cosa terribile da dire, lo so [...]. Voglio un bene da matti ai miei, lo giuro. È solo che vorrei che fossero... diversi. Normali, cioè. Come i genitori di tutti gli altri ragazzi della mia classe (Wadia 2006, 39).

Parents are seen by the adolescent protagonist as an encumbrance, because with their ideas and customs, they anchor her to their roots, reminding her always of where she comes from. She is thus ashamed of

her own parents, because they represent the obstacle to her own complete assimilation into the culture in which she is immersed; the Italian culture. The teenager considers her parents to be not integrated in the society in which they live and work, for the simple reason that:

mamma si veste sempre all'indiana, sfoggiando un sari sgargiante dopo l'altro, si pettina sempre all'indiana, cucina sempre all'indiana, parla sempre indiano. Scommetto che se ci fosse un modo di russare all'indiana lo farebbe (Wadia 2006, 40).

On the other hand, referring to her father, she says: «Sebbene parli un italiano comprensibile, ragiona come un contadino indiano» (Wadia 2006, 40); Even if he speaks comprehensible Italian, he reasons like an Indian farmer<sup>2</sup>. All of this brings her to the following conclusion: «A volte la loro ostinata nostalgia mi fa impazzire» (Wadia 2006, 40).

Food is often associated with nostalgia itself. Especially for immigrants, food represents the umbilical cord with the homeland and with childhood memories<sup>3</sup>. The preparation of food, the selection of ingredients, and the manner in which a meal is consumed are indicators of a given culture, in a certain time and place. And so, as some books demonstrate by telling stories with recipes (Sereni 2005, Bongarzoni 1996), or through the food which is eaten and the way in which it is consumed, we can add that food is a language, a code, a kind of vocabulary which is often more effective and universal than spoken words. Sitting down around a table for the consumption of a meal is an age-old ritual, and this moment is also one for communication or for listening to our own silence. Feeding, therefore, has come to be a form of communication, where the table becomes a place of cultural exchange and the fruit of the encounter between diverse civilisations. In his book, *Il cibo come cultura*, Massimo Montanari, expert of medieval studies and gastronomy, discusses how humans, by modifying

2. Paradoxically, the attitude of the father, defined by the daughter as an Indian farmer, not accustomed to pasta and to the chewing of this unfamiliar food, is the most entire/complete. Because while the mother, by cooking pasta, tries to please, even if only momentarily, the daughter, the father always remains coherent to his own principles. During the meal, he reaffirms with pride his own culinary origins, when he exclaims: «We don't like this stuff, we like curry. And we eat with our hands» (WADIA 2006, 49). It is precisely his own loyalty to his roots which makes possible the real integration of the daughter with her friends, and the integration of the friends into the real life of the daughter.

3. The same Laila Wadia, in another story, pays homage to a shop in Trieste where she would go to smell the spices of her land, and thus, of her infancy, whenever she felt nostalgic (WADIA 2007, 131).

food according to their requirements and their own identity, transform this element of nature into an element of culture. People create food: they choose it, they transform it, they decide how to consume it and, in this way, they make a simple dish, such as *spaghetti al pomodoro*, symbol of the cultural and social identity of an entire nation. The essence of food marks rituals and seasons, and turning points and changes within our existence, continuously producing an interior struggle between the temptation of the new and superficial, and the allure of our old roots.

Going back to the indian-italian adolescent, she proceeds to ascertain with satisfaction that, fortunately, she does not at all resemble her parents, thus marking the distant stance she has taken towards them. As a second generation emigrant, born and raised in Italy, she is completely aligned with the taste and trends of her peers, and she refuses a priori her family's customs, retaining that her parents are overly anchored to the past. Even if it is the teenage daughter who speaks in first-person within the story, the point of view of the writer, a first-generation emigrant, coincides with that of the parents, who do not in any way intend to hide what they feel to be their identity. Any concerns regarding identity belong instead to the daughter, who believes she can integrate herself through food, and therefore, asks her mother to cook pasta. But what does chicken curry represent?

It is clear that if for the girl of Indian origin, this dish is an obstacle to her complete assimilation into a well-defined group and culture, then for the Italian teenagers, chicken curry represents the other, the novel, the exotic, that which they are not and which attracts them. In the case of the parents, the curry is synonymous with their own essence. While being perfectly integrated into Italian society, the parents remain anchored to their traditions, to their customs, and most fiercely of all, to food. They live well in Italy, as they have succeeded in reaching a more than respectable position socially and economically; yet, this success does not harm their own roots. For them, integration does not mean the renunciation or hiding of their origins, of which they continue to be proud.

Returning to the story, «Salsicce», we can summarise that what Igiaba Scego describes is a forced attitude of embracing another culture, closely followed by a profound sense of guilt. In fact, the protagonist of Igiaba Scego attempts to find a synthesis (where for synthesis, we refer to the process, elaborated by Hegel, of thesis-antithesis-synthesis). She wants to go beyond the moment of marginalisation and to seek out a rapid solution to her problem, but in reality, this decision from the beginning leaves many feelings of guilt. The synthesis is realised, but only superficially. It is evident that in these stories tied to multiculturalism, the immigrant writers include much of themselves and their own experiences with typical foods from their

countries of origin and arrival. Even if these works are not biographical, they transmit the writers' personal and private point of view, as we can read between the lines aspects of their lived experience.

Going back to the concept of imprinting, we can say that Igiaba Scego, a second-generation immigrant, presents a mixed imprinting that, as such, is lived more problematically, while Laila Wadia, a first-generation immigrant, possesses a much stronger imprinting, which helps to better live the experience of difference, no longer seen as a problem. It is no longer a deprivation, but an addition. The point of view to take is therefore that of the parents in «Curry di pollo», which coincides with the perspective of the story's writer. To be more precise, the real solution between two worlds which are so different is in their irreconcilability. The mother and father who, according to the daughter, do not adapt themselves, have actually understood what the true answer is: they live these differences well, they have found the key. It is about a well-established fact, a realisation: differences still create fear, but they are experienced as they are, rather than as something to overcome or to hide. They are valued and experienced as additional merit. Only by recognising the irreconcilability of differences as an asset, and by not denying likely and inevitable contrasts, it is possible to find the key to multiculturalism.

Returning to the question initially posed, we can say that the two texts analysed confirm the hypothesis that we eat what we would like to be; food, then, also assumes a function of social recognition.

I would like to conclude this brief paper on a theme which still provides for infinite exploration, with the words of Laila Wadia, one of the writers, and the editor, of a book with the emblematic title, *Mondopentola* (meaning world pot). In this work, it is no accident that it is still food and its implications which act as the protagonist of twelve culinary stories by just as many immigrant writers. Wadia writes:

Amo le contaminazioni. Senza mescolanze non esisterebbe alcuna forma di vita, perché non ci sarebbe né acqua da bere, né aria da respirare, né fuoco per scaldarci e per cucinare [...].

Senza meticcio la lingua italiana non si sarebbe arricchita di magici neologismi come «maroggia», metà mare, metà spiaggia<sup>4</sup>. E senza l'abbraccio geografico, linguistico e culturale fra le genti, non esisterebbe l'interessantissimo filone della letteratura di emigrazione (Wadia 2007, 9).

4. «Maroggia» is a neologism coined by Christiana de Caldas Brito, a Brazilian transplanted in Italy, in her novel *Qui e là*.

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