

Igiaba Scego's "Adua": Linking Italy's Past and Present

Judith Harris (July 12, 2017)



Novelist Igiaba Scego, the author of "Adua," interweaves time, people, and tragedies, as her solitary character, Adua, whispers her most secret thoughts and dreams to Bernini's marble statue of an elephant in front of the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva.

Adua is a solitary woman, born in Mogadiscio but living since her late teens in today's Rome. She has no one better to whom she can bare her soul than the marble statue in front of the church of **Santa Maria sopra Minerva**. To Bernini's sculpted elephant, upon whose shoulders rises a tiny obelisque, Adua whispers her most intimate and painful thoughts about identity, which are the warp and weave of this novel by Igiaba Scego. Among these painful memories are her relations with her difficult father, Zoppe, whom she sees as compromised for having worked as a translator in Somalia for Mussolini's Fascists, but who was himself a victim of Fascist violence.

In Italy, the novel "[Adua](#) [2]" was published by Giunti in 2015, and by New Vessel Press this June, with a translation into English by Jamie Richards. The author, [Igiaba Scego](#) [3], is often described as a "transcultural" journalist. She interweaves time, people, and tragedies, including today's: her character Adua is wed to a considerably younger husband. He was one of the desperate migrants who had landed at Lampedusa, and she met him when he was drunk at the train station in Rome. Ambiguity is the name of the game: she treats him kindly at times but then loses her temper. While



fearing that sooner or later he will leave her for a younger woman, she knows that he needs her.

Despite the past between the two countries, for both Adua and her father Italy loomed as a mythical state. Now, however, her father dead, she inherited the family home and daydreams of returning to the "brand-new, peacetime" Somalia. Still, as she writes with elegance:

I love Rome in the summer, especially the light in the evening when the sun is setting. It's hot, even the seagulls seem nicer and make you want to hug them.

They dominate the piazzas, but here you are, my little elephant, and they don't dare. Shoo, away from Piazza della Minerva! I feel safe when I'm around you. Here,

I'm in Magalo—at home. My father had big ears too, but he was never good at listening, and I was never able to talk to him. It's different with you. That's why I'm

grateful to Bernini for having made you. A little marble elephant holding up the smallest obelisk in the world. A toothpick.

The character's name, Adua, was her Somali father's choice and recalls the famous Victory of Adwa of 1896, celebrated every March 1 in Ethiopia as a public holiday. At that time Italy had colonized two African territories, Eritrea and Somalia, and was keen to expand its African empire by invading and conquering Ethiopia. It failed, and the battle, in which 7,000 Italians and over 4,000 Ethiopians died, was the first ever decisive victory of a African army over a European army. Its outcome was Italy's signing the Treaty of Addis Abeba, which recognized Ethiopia as an independent state. In 1991 Somalia then saw a civil war, in which half a million people died.

Carlo Lucarelli described her book as "a sweet sorrow that made me wish it were much longer," whereas a critic for the Huffington Post called it a "punch in the stomach." And a critic for [Blog.Graphe.it](#) [4] wrote that the novel "provokes a disturbing sensation in the stomach for its harshness -- a contemporary story that we do not really want to know about because it is uncomfortable and capable of removing our easy sense of being extraneous to certain arguments."

As this suggests, Igiaba Scego is a strong, intense writer, and this reader admits difficulty in grasping her account of the horrid racism inflicted upon black Africans. Having been raised in the North of the U.S., and indeed upon what was called during the [American Civil War](#) [5] the Underground Railroad Freedom Trail, I knew little of the degree of racism Scego describes. But then, recalling the savage violence of [Mississippi's Freedom Summer](#) [6] of 1964, in which friends were among the 700 Northern volunteers participating along with Southern activists, I was obliged to rethink.

Until that time in what was the most racist and retrograde part of the American South complete segregation existed. During that year dozens of protesters were murdered, tortured, castrated and beaten, and there were 50 explosions. As later was shown, fully half the Mississippi police were members of the Ku Klux Klan; one of the murderers was a county sheriff, another a state legislator, according to a memoir by [Nikole Hannah-Jones](#) [7], published in The Atlantic.

To order a copy of the book click [here](#) [2]

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