FOOD DISGUST IN NARRATIVES OF MIGRANT VOICES IN ITALY. THE REJECTION OF FOOD AS A FORM OF IDENTITY RENEGOTIATION AND RESISTANCE

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Abstract

Following a literary perspective, this paper explores the role of dietary choices in the identity restructuring process of individuals, particularly within the works of migrant writers. According to Vito Teti (2001) and Horn (2010), food serves as a form of cultural defense and community cohesion for immigrants. Additionally, Lorena Carrara (2013) notes that food disgust plays a role in shaping both individual identity and a sense of belonging for social groups. Building upon these premises, the article analyzes the role of disgust within selected texts by migrant and second-generation authors in their process of assimilation, hybridization, or resistance in Italy. Specifically, the research focuses on stories that emphasize the significance of food and rejection of food as indicators of cultural belonging, such as those from the anthologies *Matriciana/Cous cous* (2002), *Pecore nere* (2005), *Mondopentola* (2007), and *Amori bicolori* (2008), as well as Lakhous's novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006).

In these literary works, food disgust becomes a valuable key for literary interpretation. Indeed, Montanari argues that different cultures encounter each other primarily through food (2002). Moreover, at the base of dietary disgust there are the omnivore's paradox and the principle of incorporation (Fischler 1980, Nicolosi 2007, Megli 2017). Thus, the rejection of the Other's food or, conversely, the rejection of one's own community's food highlight the diverse outcomes of integration dynamics in the new socio-cultural context for migrants. The potential outcomes of the renegotiation of the migrant's identity, as presented in the case studies, range from the risk of self-annihilation to the resistance against the Otherness of the new host society. In conclusion, by establishing a link between narrative, food sociology, and the analysis of the migration process in Italy, this paper demonstrates how disgust provides a new lens for interpreting the identity restructuring experience in migrant and second-generation writers.

Keywords: food disgust: food and identity; renegotiation; integration processes; Italian migrant literature

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Introduction[1]

Over the past few years, the world of gastronomy and food has carved out an increasingly prominent place in Italian public discourse. Italian cuisine is no longer merely an export product for the international market but has become an apparently untouchable identity marker in the name of tradition.[2] Italianness is thus largely defined through the emblematic dishes that represent it. A range of phenomena and intersecting levels help explain this convergence between Italianness and food: gastropopulism and gastronationalism within political and identity discourses, both state and private initiatives of gastrodiplomacy, and food and wine tourism as an economic driver.[3]

If cuisine plays a key role in the construction of contemporary national identity, then food and one's relationship with it can serve as tools for reflecting on personal and social identity, as well as on the definition and renegotiation of Italianness. Such reflections grounded in food emerge clearly in the writings of migrant authors and second-generation Italians. The sociology of food has long highlighted the close relationship between eating practices, identity construction, and the sense of belonging.[4] In the context of migration to Italy, food has also served as a valuable tool in grassroots social experiments aimed at fostering integration and overcoming urban inequalities, through practices of sharing and intercultural encounter (Fontefrancesco 2023). In contrast, literary studies have often focused almost exclusively on the symbolic value of food for the individual, particularly with regard to identity renegotiation and citizenship.[5]

While also reflecting on the symbolic value of food as a marker of cultural belonging, this contribution proposes an integration of this analytical focus. It seeks to highlight not only food and eating choices, but above all the physical and symbolic reactions of migrant or second-generation individuals to food itself. Specifically, this study focuses on the reaction of food disgust, as it reflects processes of identity renegotiation and offers

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

2 Grandi (2018), however, argues that the invention of an Italian culinary tradition is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the 1970s.

3 See: Naccarato, Nowak and Eckert 2017; Parasecoli 2017; Fino and Cecconi 2021; Mendelson Forman 2024.

4 See: Fischler 1988; Rozin 1990; Teti 2001; S. Priyadarshini, M.R Bindu, M. Sumathy, and A. Dorathy 2024.

5 See: Hanna 2004; Siggers-Manson 2004; Wright 2004; Horn 2010; Pezzarossa 2011; Angelini 2013; Bellesia-Contuzzi 2017; Fiucci 2019.

a tangible response to the symbolic dynamics of integration. The stories selected for this analysis appear in the anthologies *Matriciana/Cous cous* (2002), *Pecore nere* (2005), *Mondopentola* (2007), and *Amori bicolori* (2008), while one story is drawn from the novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* by Lakhous (2006).

The case studies have been selected based on three criteria: first, the author and protagonist share a 'non-Italian' background, that is, a status originating from a sense of displacement, either experienced directly or inherited.[6] For both migrants and those born in Italy to foreign parents, integration presents complex challenges. On one hand, the assimilative pressure from the host society seeks homogenization, which facilitates cultural integration while simultaneously erasing and rejecting the markers of Otherness. On the other hand, divergent subjects resist in order to maintain community cohesion, although this can at times lead to an *a priori* antagonism. This internal tension demands constant renegotiation, as reflected in migrant and postcolonial writings (Benvenuti 2012).

The second criterion concerns the centrality of food and the presence of rejection or disgust within the narrative. In the Italian context, where national and regional dishes are attributed significant cultural value (Kostioukovitch 2015), food choices constitute a privileged field of study. Moreover, if, as Fischler (1988) suggests, food contributes to both collective belonging and personal identity, then disgust plays a central role in shaping the migrant subject's identity. The confrontation with 'acquired' new foods is a necessary step toward acceptance and integration into the host society. Conversely, 'native' comfort foods often hinder this acceptance while providing a nostalgic link to one's country and community of origin. As a result, within the framework of food culture, the rejection of the Other's food—or, conversely, of one's own traditional food—constitutes a material response that mirrors various outcomes of integration and attempts to define one's social and personal identity.

6 The terminological choice—as well as that of "non-native nationals"—attempts to coherently encapsulate individuals of widely diverse ethnic backgrounds and life experiences, but it remains overly limiting. As Brogi (2011) notes, even labels such as "migrant writers" or "second-generation authors" can be reductive. Nonetheless, as Gnisci (2003) writes, these two categories include both those who have experienced the trauma of expatriation and those who have inherited such trauma—often expressed through the lack of legal recognition for their attempts at identity "creolization". Their work and reflections mirror these complex experiences (see: Ferraro 2008; Serafin 2014).

The last criterion is the historical context of production. The texts analyzed were published between 2002 and 2008, a period marked by national and international transformation. The September 11 attacks had a negative impact on the perception of non-EU foreigners, while Italy debated, passed, and implemented the Bossi-Fini law strictly regulating immigration. In this context, for authors of 'non-Italian' background, writing became an opportunity for reflection and for mirroring the social reality. Questioning one's identity and sense of Italianness had become a pressing urgency. These criteria enable an exploration of how food—as a cultural symbol—and food disgust—as both physical reaction and symbolic response—become a terrain of confrontation for migrants grappling with dynamics of belonging and Otherness.

This contribution is thus structured into two main sections: the first is theoretical and methodological, offering a brief overview of food as a communication system, the origins of disgust, and the role of food as a cultural aggregator for migrants. The second section analyzes the selected texts through the lens of food disgust and rejection. The ambivalent relationship with certain foods, and their refusal, reflects both social and personal identity renegotiation strategies, ranging from the risk of self-annihilation to resistance against assimilation, and intercultural acceptance and hybridization.

A Matter of Taste. Food Disgust

From a sociological and anthropological perspective, food cannot be reduced to a mere means of satisfying individual nutritional needs. Instead, it can be considered a complex system of communication and signification, one that relies on shared symbolic-cultural codes for its correct understanding and interpretation, and is thus deeply interconnected with the cultural practices of a community.[7] Within this system, taste acts as a key for decoding and cannot therefore be seen merely as the sum of exclusively individual dietary preferences and aversions. In fact, in its earliest stages of formation, taste is shaped not only by personal experience but, more importantly, by collectively socialized dynamics, which progressively narrow the potentially inexhaustible range of dietary possibilities through in-group processes.[8]

7 For a detailed discussion on the affinities between food systems and linguistic or communication systems, see: Barthes 1961; Le Breton 2007.

8 Rozin (1990) and Guidetti and Cavazza (2014) identify the family context and peer group as the primary social influences on individual food preferences and aversions.

Only secondarily does individual action influence the specific formation of personal taste. As a result, individual eating habits and dominant tastes primarily reflect the selections made by the community, reinforcing its cohesion as a group, and only marginally reflect purely personal preferences.

When this collectively shared and personal taste encounters a food that cannot be processed within its prevailing interpretative framework, a reaction of rejection occurs, manifesting as disgust.[9] From a strictly biological standpoint, the function of disgust is rooted in the protection of the body from potentially harmful foods, triggering unpleasant sensations and even physical reactions of expulsion (Carrara 2015). However, reflecting the ambiguous relationship between humans and nourishment, physiological disgust integrates also three foundational cultural invariants: classificatory thought, the omnivore's paradox, and the principle of incorporation.[10]Classificatory thought shapes dietary systems where certain foods are permitted while others are forbidden—such as taboo foods, which differ across cultures. This taxonomy of edible versus inedible often reflects conflicting symbolic, religious, and identity-related considerations rather than purely rational criteria. This reveals a community's internal boundaries, reinforcing collective identity through exclusion as much as through inclusion.

The second invariant, known as the omnivore's paradox, captures the tension inherent in the human condition as a species that can adapt its diet but remains bound by the dependence on a potentially risky variety of foods. This duality creates an ongoing tension between *neophilia*—the attraction to novelty and the drive for change—and *neophobia*—the fear of harmful contamination, corresponding to discomfort with the unknown. As a result, dietary choice becomes a site of anxiety, where the desire to explore new flavors conflicts with the need for safety and familiarity.

This paradox, in turn, originates from the third invariant, rooted in magical thinking: the principle of incorporation. To ingest a food is not merely to consume its nutrients but to absorb its magical-symbolic qualities, po-

9 Barthes (1989) argues that the existence of taste is tautological, as it is grounded in the binary opposition between what is pleasant and what is unpleasant. According to Carrara (2013), the existence of the unpleasant consequently gives rise to disgust as a corollary of taste.

10 Within the field of the anthropology and sociology of food, Fischler's work (1990) remains the most comprehensive analysis of the three invariants underlying taste and eating habits, though it is notably influenced by the research of food psychologist Paul Rozin. His foundational approach inspired the work of numerous scholars, such as Nicolosi (2007), Carrara (2013), and Megli (2017).

tentially altering the consumer's Self. In order to preserve group members from such physical-symbolic alteration and contamination, communities have often established more or less rigid dietary norms. Thus, the rejection of certain foods is not merely a matter of personal idiosyncrasy and repulsion, but rather reflects socially mediated anxieties about identity, belonging, and self-preservation.

However, the exclusionary function of disgust is further amplified on a symbolic level when considering the role of cuisine. Montanari (2002) argues that traditions and collective identities get embodied in cuisine through forms that are easily accessible and replicable, providing the most immediate form of contact between cultures. Through cuisine, understood as a specific cultural system, a community materially conveys information and expresses a shared belonging among its members, while also marking its difference from others. Yet, as in any intercultural relationship, encountering foreign dietary diversity often triggers a confrontation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the accepted and the excluded. This can lead to various reactions, including disgust and rejection, as the boundaries of taste and identity are negotiated and redefined.

This dynamic is particularly evident within contexts of migration and nationals with a 'non-Italian' background, where food and cuisine contribute to reshaping the sense of belonging. Here, the tensions between inherited culinary norms and the new gastronomic influences encountered in the host society reflect broader processes of social inclusion and exclusion. In such a framework, food disgust offers a valuable lens through which to analyze how migrants and second-generation Italians navigate the complex interplay between belonging and displacement, revealing how the boundaries of taste often reflect broader processes of social assimilation, adaptation, and resistance.

Therefore, in the perception of 'non-native' nationals, food assumes a particular cultural significance, one that is deeply linked both to the experience of displacement and to the historical context and immigration and integration policies of the host society.

Food and Belonging in Italy of the Bossi-Fini Era

Caplan (1997) and Horn (2010) argue that food acts as a cultural and identity marker for a community, actively contributing to the definition and expression of both social and personal identity. At the same time, food is a tangible reality in which different cultural systems may intersect and

contaminate one another—or, conversely, cancel each other out and oppose culinary Otherness.

Within the migratory process, Cipolla (1997) observes that food ensures a symbolic as well as material connection with the homeland and its traditions. Migrants' eating behaviors respond to three primary needs: identity, belonging, and place. Uprooted from their original context, expatriates can only evoke their homeland through memory. As a result, they experience a precarious sense of belonging, as they simultaneously belong to and remain outside of both the community of origin and the host society. This condition forces the individual into a tension between preserving one's roots and assimilating into the new social fabric in order to be accepted. Consequently, the individual is compelled to continuously renegotiate their social identity as a member of a group—without any certainty as to which group they truly belong to. This questioning of one's social identity inevitably impacts one's personal identity as a self-standing individual, often creating confusing overlaps between the two levels.

Recognition and identification within a community become particularly urgent when the new context radically differs from the original one. The preservation and adaptation of food habits—two dynamics that are not mutually exclusive—manifest this need. As Teti (2001) notes, the migratory process entails the coexistence of continuity and change, tradition and innovation. This dynamic contributes to the construction of a new symbolic order while preserving a vital point of reference and imagined return. Migration thus serves as a transformative element in dietary behavior and consumption, while encouraging both conservatism and nostalgia. Amidst this tension, ongoing contact with the dietary habits of the host society fosters behavioral changes. Meanwhile, nostalgia for home and its lost flavors drives efforts to symbolically reconstruct and preserve the social and emotional bonds of the original community.

In the writings of authors of 'non-Italian' background, food therefore emerges as a marker of belonging.[11] These writers express their continuity or divergence from Italian society through the preservation or modification of their eating habits. Yet, their divergence from a supposed standard of Italianness—also in culinary terms—can imply

11 Chiara, Romaioli, and Contarello (2023) observe that the "food and cooking" class accounts for a significant 6.2% of the textual and lexical segments examined within a large thirty-year corpus of narratives identified as "Italian postcolonial literature."

the fear of being perceived as threateningly different and consequently being rejected. This concern offers another lens through which to read these case studies and is closely linked to the historical context in which these narratives are produced.

In 2002, in Italy the prevailing perception of foreigners was markedly negative, particularly toward individuals of non-European origin and Islamic faith. Massari (2006) notes that pre-existing prejudices in Western public discourse were exacerbated to construct an idealized "enemy image" in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. On the legislative front, the center-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi passed the Bossi-Fini law (Law 189/2002)—still in effect today—which criminalizes irregular migrants and introduced stricter controls on those already residing in Italy.[12] Furthermore, Italian citizenship is granted solely through *ius sanguinis*, while migrants and second-generation Italians face numerous obstacles and restrictions in obtaining legal recognition.[13] The Otherness of the new Italians is thus institutionally sanctioned.

Such a context pushes individuals to question their degree of "Italianness"—a condition they may live, yet which is often unacknowledged—and to ask themselves what this "Italianness" truly is, if it even exists in a stable form.[14] In a society like Italy's, where cuisine is felt as a fundamental trait of communal identity, to narrate food and one's physical reaction to it means to reflect on one's social identity—often confused with personal identity—and on one's belonging to one or more communities.

In the following paragraphs, the protagonists of these stories will attempt to respond to such questions and to define themselves within society. As one might expect, their answers will be varied, deeply personal, and marked by inner conflict—offering multiple perspectives and insights on the topic.

12 For a summary of the evolution of immigration laws in Italy, see: Maisto 2013.

13 Marchetti (2010) and Clò (2012) note that in order to apply for citizenship, non-EU foreigners must prove they have legally resided in Italy for ten consecutive years and that they have sufficient income for sustenance. Conversely, individuals born in Italy to foreign parents can only apply for citizenship upon turning 18, provided that both they and their parents have legally resided in Italy since birth.

14 Fiucci (2019) and Raimo (2019), in contrast to the most nationalist-conservative positions, rightly point out the historically variable and constructed nature of the concept of Italianness.

Dangerous Assimilations. Rejection of Familial Food and Loss of Origins

In Laila Wadia's short story *Curry di pollo*, the main character is Anandita, a second-generation teenage Italian born to Indian parents. She considers herself fully Italian, having been born and raised in Milan, and asserts her complete Italianization. Because of this, she feels ashamed of her parents' Indian roots, viewing them as "Indian Flintstones who still think they live in a mud hut." From her perspective, they are not "normal," not "like [her] classmates' parents" (Wadia 2005, 39). She cannot understand their "stubborn nostalgia" (40) or their attachment to traditions from a country she does not consider her own. She stigmatizes their traits of Otherness in relation to the norms of Italian society, relegating them to a marginal position. Conversely, Anandita feels fully integrated, proudly claiming to share the same experiences and tastes as her Italian peers, even when those clash with her parents' preferences (39). Following a dynamic observed by Genovese, Filippini, and Zannoni (2010, 61) in many second-generation Italians, she conforms "to behavioral models typical of the host society, which are little understood, if not outright rejected, by [her] parents" in order to carve out her own space of independence within the family setting. A generational conflict thus intertwines with the process of redefining her cultural—or rather, social—identity.

This conflict manifests itself in her antagonistic relationship with food. Her father dismisses her breakfast as "junk," while praising the virtues of Indian cuisine (Wadia 2005, 43). Anandita, on the other hand, is intimately repelled by traditional Indian food:

> They don't even know […] that I throw away the bag with the Indian bread stuffed with vegetables strangled in oil and spices that Mom makes me take to school for a snack. What they don't know can't hurt them. (45)

For her, the food her parents cherish is devoid of quality—it is a lifeless emblem of a diversity she seeks to reject (46). Anandita wishes to belong solely to Italian culture, renouncing every trace of an Otherness she finds shameful. Her desire for belonging is directed exclusively toward a community of peers who are fully integrated within the standardized framework of Italian society, leaving no room for a multiple or hybrid sense of identity.

When she invites Marco, her secret boyfriend,[15] and her friend Samantha over for dinner, she firmly insists her mother not to cook "curry or other

15 Marco's character provides a link between the story and the broader political context of the time, as his relationship with Anandita is described as "clandestine."

Indian stuffs" (46). Anandita's mother had inherited the curry recipe from her mother-in-law, who "knew how to make the best chicken curry in all of Mirapur" (47). There is a deep connection between the dish and the family's roots. Since it is "loaded with cultural connotations" (Angelini 2013, 250), the chicken curry stands as a symbol of the culture and identity that the protagonist wishes to reject. Anandita perceives the dish as a marker of difference and alterity, one that could jeopardize her integration into the social group she identifies with, undermining her carefully constructed Italian identity. In a moment of social interaction with members of her in-group, Anandita hides and refuses to present a traditional dish that would evoke her belonging to the Indian community as well.

Given her still-fragile sense of being Italian, she tends toward hyper-identification with the dietary norms of Italian society, accompanied by the anxiety this conformity entails. For this reason, she insists on serving only simple pasta with tomato sauce, which Angelini (2013, 255) defines as "a symbol of the cultural and social identity of an entire nation", namely Italy.

During the dinner, food rejection shifts to her father, who struggles to eat the pasta, swallowing it "like a pelican" and comparing it to "rubber tubes" (Wadia 2005, 49–50). Most shocking to him is Marco's admission that he enjoys curry—in unconventional forms like "pizza with mushrooms, cream, and curry" or "shrimp and curry rice" with "a spoonful of Parmesan" (50). For Anandita's father, such reinterpretations of traditional cuisine are intolerable. However, since there is no curry left from the previous meal, he can only describe the recipe to the guests, doing so with evident passion, revealing an intimate and nostalgic bond with the dish (51). For him, curry is not just food—it is part of his personal history and identity as an Indian migrant living in Italy.

The conflicting attitudes toward curry embody two opposing processes of identity construction. On one hand, Anandita's parents find in the dish a tangible link to their family, their community, and their past—a sense of belonging that allows them to feel both Indian and individually affirmed. As Horn (2010, 64) notes, despite living in Italian society for many years, they resist cultural dilution and the pressures of the dominant culture in order to preserve their extra-Italian identity. On the other hand, Anandita rejects the values and culture that her family tries to maintain. She identifies more with the dominant culture of her peers, which she sees as her true point of refer-

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Marco's parents are Lega voters who consider the Bossi-Fini law too lenient toward immigrants, while Anandita's parents remain outside the political sphere—either by choice or due to lack of access.

ence, and her personal and social identities begin to merge. As an Italian girl seeking validation of her Italianness, she develops an aversion to curry, especially in socially controlled situations. The food representing her heritage is categorically rejected, becoming a source of shame and potential social stigma. This refusal reveals a deep desire for full acceptance and assimilation into Italian society, interpreted as a homogeneous group. Anandita views Italian society as her only true community of belonging, even at the cost of erasing her origins, her family history, and her culinary heritage.

In Anandita's story, the desire for assimilation becomes entangled with the search for an individual identity that is emancipated from her family but embedded within her in-group. However, complete assimilation and homogenization do not necessarily align with a desire for emancipation and social recognition. In some cases, the willingness to assimilate into a new society and culture is not a choice but an indispensable prerequisite for acceptance. Yet, renouncing one's roots—even partially—is a decision that carries considerable emotional pain.

In the short story *Estraneità* by Muin Masri (2008), simulating food appreciation or rejection in accordance with the social context is perceived as a necessary effort for the migrant to be accepted. The Arab protagonist, Rashid, feels the need to be accepted by his fiancée Roberta's family and, by extension, by Italian society. The opportunity arises during a family lunch, in which sharing a meal represents both hospitality and a reaffirmation of roles through mutual recognition as equals. For this reason, Rashid forces himself to politely compliment the still-undercooked lasagna (109). Carrara (2013, 129) reminds us that appreciating the food of the Other is a tool for fostering fraternity, thereby enabling acceptance. The alternative, conversely, is mockery and discomfort. Rashid's meeting with the priest to discuss the wedding underscores this tension:

> "I get it, you don't eat pork; Allah forbids it"," he laughs. "But what can you do, son? We're in Italy, not Arabia… Mind you, I have nothing against your religion—it's a great culture—but we're just so different. Even our food is different, and that's the most basic thing in the world. But we're not here to talk about food, are we? We're here for something more serious, if I understand correctly". […] "Oh, sorry, I forgot you cannot drink wine either". (Masri 2008, 115)

Despite Rashid's efforts to integrate, the priest reproduces the most common stereotypes about Muslims. He projects these assumptions onto Rashid, expecting confirmation of his preconceived notions. Forbidden foods and drinks become a source of misunderstanding and ridicule, re-

inforcing Rashid's inescapable Otherness in the eyes of a society he has lived in for years. He is not fully recognized as Italian, but he no longer feels entirely Palestinian either. Once the priest leaves, the only space of agency left to him is to drink precisely that wine which had been denied to him. Feigning aversion thus becomes a survival strategy: a means of easing interaction with the host community by validating its existing prejudices—albeit at the cost of one's own dignity.

The inner conflict between personal and social identity becomes even more pronounced in Tahar Lamri's short story *Il caffè* (2007). For the protagonist, returning to Algeria after twenty years in Europe means reconnecting with his family and with his deeper sense of self. However, Majid paradoxically desires to feel like a stranger in his own home. He no longer identifies as Algerian but rather as European, and he fears that reuniting with his family might jeopardize the independence and emancipation he has worked so hard to achieve (111). This internal tension first surfaces in his discomfort at the dining table:

> First the smells, the spices, then the colors. Accustomed to first courses, second courses, desserts, to order, in short, to the rectangular table, here I find myself at home and disoriented. (111)

The lack of order in the courses and the overwhelming sweetness and unfamiliarity of the flavors leave him without reference points, hesitant in front of the meal. At the same time, as Bellesia-Contuzzi (2017) notes, traditional food involuntarily evokes his personal memories and past. Thus, what initially appears to be repulsive—the disorder, the "orgy" of flavors moving "from salty to sweet and from sweet to salty"—becomes, unexpectedly, an expression of regained freedom (Lamri 2007, 113). Through food, Majid rediscovers an "immobile purity wrapped in familial affections" that offers a momentary sense of home in his perpetual migration (Pezzarossa 2011, 106).

However, his voluntary departure from the homeland creates a rupture between the individual and his community, revealing "the trauma of an impossible *nostos*" (107). During the coffee ritual, Majid, now accustomed to drinking "insolent, bitter Italian espresso" (Lamri 2007, 113), nearly spits out the overly sweet coffee prepared by his mother, involuntarily reacting with disgust. Witnessing this, his mother no longer recognizes him:

> "Do you know that my son is dead?"
> "What son, mother? I don't know of any brother who died while I was away!"

> "I had a son… He left one day, twenty years ago… They came to tell me he had died abroad, but I didn't want to believe it. Today, I am certain". […]
> "You are not my son. You've taken my son's place, and I don't know why."
> "[…] my son loved sweet things; he couldn't drink bitter coffee. It's impossible". (113-114)

For the mother, the son who emigrated died long ago. She sees his altered taste as proof that he is no longer the child she once knew (Bellesia-Contuzzi 2017, 93). Majid is no longer considered part of the community he left behind. Taste becomes a tool for classification, marking inclusion for those who are alike and exclusion for those perceived as different (Carrara 2013, 113). Majid's rejection of the sweet coffee symbolically severs a fundamental link to his belonging. His original community cannot—or will not—fully reaccept the self-excluded individual. While the encounter with traditional family food rekindles a personal identity still deeply tied to Algeria, the revulsion toward the overly sweet coffee makes clear that this identity no longer aligns with his social identity, which is no longer recognized within the family context.

In the end, although his mother eventually accepts her son's preference for bitter coffee, the reconciliation leaves an open wound. The protagonist remains a foreigner in his own home, his original identity questioned and denied by his own family. The rejection of a familiar flavor from the past becomes a source of existential fragility, one that may culminate in the loss of identity—stretched between the one personally felt and the one socially acknowledged.

In the short stories discussed, the protagonists renegotiate their identity through a process of assimilation in which food plays a central role. Often unconsciously, adopting the tastes and food habits of the host society becomes a strategy for seeking recognition and acceptance. As Ricorda (2015, 66) aptly observes, in a dynamic of integration-incorporation, food enables the foreigner to enter the new community—not merely as a passive recipient of inclusion, but as an active agent seeking to be accepted. Nevertheless, this interpretation tends to absolve the host community of responsibility, placing the burden of incorporation entirely on the agency of the individual.

Moreover, uncritical assimilation can lead to two radical consequences. On a societal level, it tends to erase complexity and enforce a rigid, homogenous and immutable model of cultural belonging. On an individual level, it risks annihilating one's uniqueness, collapsing the distinction between personal identity and social identity—until the former is entirely subsumed by the latter. This dynamic is reflected in the object of the disgust expressed

in the stories. The characters' aversion is directed toward foods with which they once maintained deep emotional and symbolic ties, or foods the host society expect migrants should refuse. These dishes, once familiar, are now physically rejected because they are perceived as incompatible with the social identity the characters seek to affirm.

Rejecting New Dietary Habits. From Resistance to New Awareness

Adopting the food habits of the host society to assimilate and conform can degenerate into a form of (self-)exclusion. Anandita does not seek to reconcile her belonging to two distinct communities; instead, she chooses to reject the one she inherited. Rashid embraces the role of the stereotypical and, consequently, excluded foreigner as a way to be more easily recognized—if not accepted—by the host society. Majid, by contrast, discovers that his exclusion has already been enacted and sanctioned by his community of origin.

In *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* by Amara Lakhous (2006), Amedeo-Ahmed acknowledges that his passion for pizza "has mingled with [his] blood" (33). His preference is not merely a matter of taste; it is a tangible symptom of his Italianization. Pezzarossa (2011, 104) rightly notes that Amedeo-Ahmed feels compelled to erase his Algerian origins in order to embody an Italian identity that is socially accepted. To adopt a new, legitimate social identity, he must suppress markers of alterity—at least in the public sphere.

Conversely, the Iranian character Parviz represents the opposite pole. He clings to his original identity, expressed through his intense disgust for pizza:

> […] I saw an Italian girl devouring a pizza as big as an umbrella. I felt nauseous and almost threw up!
>
> […] My hatred for pizza is unparalleled, but that doesn't mean I hate everyone who eats it. […] I have no hatred toward Italians. (11-12)

His near-physical revulsion toward pizza reflects a conflicted and distorted attitude toward Italian society. Pizza—widely recognized as a symbol of Italian identity—becomes, in this context, "an effective trope that allows a migrant writer to also manipulate stereotypes about Italianness" (Parati 2005, 77). Rejecting pizza thus equates to rejecting an idea of Italianness perceived as an imposed norm. Parviz exhibits a complete refusal to adapt to Italian cuisine. Although he was a respected chef in his home-

town, in Italy he refuses to learn local ingredients or cooking techniques, compromising his role at work. His integration fails, not due to obstacles imposed by others, but because he has no desire to even attempt it. He remains deeply tied to Iranian culinary culture. For him, cooking becomes an act of memory, a ritual that reclaims the past:

> I immediately start preparing various Iranian dishes, such as *gormeh sabzi*, *kabab kubideh*, *kashk badinjan*, and *kateh*. The smells that fill the kitchen make me forget reality, and it feels as if I'm back in my kitchen in Shiraz. (35)

Parviz's actions and sensory experiences confirm Teti's (2001) observation that cooking provides "a momentary return to the homeland, whether real or imagined." Food allows the migrant to rediscover "familiarity with lost foods" and to "find meaning and a place in a new location" (590). By recreating traditional Iranian recipes, Parviz reconnects with his cultural identity and familial roots. He views Italy as a temporary refuge, not a place where he belongs, especially given his status as a non-EU migrant (Lakhous 2006, 26). His almost militant culinary conservatism becomes a means of resisting assimilation and asserting his right to hate pizza (13).

Yet Parviz's hatred for Italian food remains deeply ambiguous. On one hand, it likely stems from his inability to feel included in Italian society and from his ongoing hope to return to Iran (21). On the other hand, his refusal to embrace Italian food may reflect a fear of forgetting Iranian cuisine and, by extension, his authentic self (34). Culinary practices are burdened with layers of personal and symbolic meaning. Parviz defines his identity through food—he is, above all, an Iranian cook living in Italy not by choice, but by necessity. Adopting the cuisine of the host country would mean compromising, even betraying, his origins and the essence of who he is. This need to keep his sense of belonging to the country of origin alive—without accepting a heterodirected affiliation, but only one that is self-directed—is reflected in his unconditional and a priori admiration for Iranian cuisine and the belittlement of Italian food, especially pizza. His evaluation relies on a comparison that favors his own in-group, thereby enacting a dynamic of self-favoritism.[16]

Parviz's culinary disgust thus becomes a form of resistance—both to preserve himself and to oppose a dominant culture that seeks to flatten

16 From a psychosocial perspective, Mazzara (1998) defines this mechanism as "self-favoritism," a common dynamic that emerges when comparisons are made—especially interethnic ones—between two groups, typically privileging one's own group of belonging (152).

out difference. His categorical rejection of Italian cuisine, symbolized by pizza, fuels an underlying resentment toward Italy itself. His nostalgic devotion to the food of his homeland produces a double effect: it shields his identity from cultural erasure, but it also entrenches that identity so rigidly that it resists any possibility of negotiation or transformation.

Conversely, Igiaba Scego's short story *Salsicce* (2005) offers a more complex resolution of identity. Processes of resistance to assimilation and processes of adaptation merge, giving rise to a new awareness of self and of an as-yet undefined sense of Italianness for the protagonist—a young Italian woman of Somali origin.

The story is set in Rome during Ferragosto, coinciding with the implementation of the Bossi-Fini law. Under this law, non-EU citizens holding temporary residence permits are required to register their fingerprints. Although the protagonist is already an Italian citizen, her Somali heritage prompts her to reflect on what it truly means to be Italian. As Hannah (2005) notes, her legal status compels her to ask whether she sees herself as Italian or as an "immigrant." Being Italian becomes not just a matter of paperwork, but of skin color and habits.

Yet, Somalia and Italy coexist within her—both legally and somatically. At one point, she creates a list of what makes her feel Somali and what makes her feel Italian (Scego 2005, 29–30). The result is a balance, confirming her status as "a woman without an identity", or rather, "with multiple identities" of equal value (28). Buying sausages becomes a symbol of her inner conflict. As Siggers Manson (2004, 83) argues, food marks the boundary "between her Italian and Somali personalities." The protagonist feels that eating and incorporating the sausages into her body would signify her complete transformation into an Italian. Being born in Italy and participating in everyday life in her neighborhood is no longer enough—she must be recognized as Italian:

> […] If I swallow these sausages one by one, will people understand that I am as Italian as they are? Just like them? Or will it all have been pointless bravado? (Scego 2005, 26)

Her inclusion in Italian society appears contingent on a sacrifice: the ingestion of *haram* food, pork sausages. This act would mean renouncing her Somali identity and physically incorporating Italianness, transforming even her body into that of the 'ideal' Italian. The pressure to belong demands a physical change.Through a kind of magical thinking, the sausages are believed to have real, transformative power:

> […] Perhaps eating a sausage would turn my neutral fingerprints into authentic made-in-Italy fingerprints. But is that what I want? (31)

However, her inner conflict triggers unease and constant changes of mind. Her decision to eat pork clashes with her lack of knowledge about how to cook it (31). Even the smell of the sausages provokes disgust, leading her to vomit before she can even taste them (32). This physical reaction works in tandem with her evolving self-awareness, giving form to emotions and reflections that had yet to fully surface.

Indeed, this visceral rejection brings clarity:

> I look at the sausages and throw them in the trash. How could I even think of eating them? Why do I want to deny myself just to […] please the sadists who introduced the humiliation of fingerprinting? Would I be more Italian with a sausage in my stomach? And less Somali? Or the complete opposite?
>
> No, I would still be the same—the same mix. And if that bothers people, from now on I won't give a damn! (35)

The disgust provoked by food imbued with a normative idea of Italianness becomes an opportunity to reconfigure a hybrid identity. As Angelini (2013) points out, the protagonist realizes that her attempt to become someone else is nothing more than a forced posture, capable only of producing superficial and temporary effects. She ultimately accepts both the traits that make her Somali and those that make her Italian—her multiple roots forming the core of her identity. There is no loss of self; rather, there is an affirmation of self, grounded in the very tension between those roots.

As Wright argues, "the coexistence and interplay of multiple identities openly challenges any reductive, essentializing attempt" (2004,105). The protagonist's newfound awareness lies in her recognition of three distinct levels of identity: personal, social, and legal. While her legal status forces her to question her Italianness, it does not and cannot override the other two dimensions, which validate her dual belonging.

The agentive resistance of the individual thus becomes a challenge to society itself. It reveals the latter's inability to grasp the complexity of lived experiences—experiences in which individuals may simultaneously belong to multiple communities without this being a form of dilution or loss. In *Salsicce*, identity is not a zero-sum game but a negotiation, in which food becomes both a site of tension and a vehicle for personal truth.

The protagonist of *Salsicce* and Parviz both use food as a tool of active resistance against the limits imposed by the host society. Denying oneself and one's sense of belonging is not a viable option, except at the

cost of self-erasure. In Parviz's case, resistance to adopting foreign tastes stems from a crisis brought on by the migratory experience. It is an effort to maintain a strong connection to his roots and a sense of cultural distinctiveness. In his situation, Wadia's (2007) statement rings especially true: "food is a refuge, a symbolic umbilical cord to the homeland often left behind reluctantly" (10). However, his resistance is primarily antagonistic and rigid, resulting in complete social isolation. By contrast, the story presented in *Salsicce* demonstrates how disgust can serve not only as a form of resistance, but also as a catalyst for reflection on the very idea of Italianness. While this concept can be legally codified in racially exclusive terms, it remains—on a lived level—a deeply permeable community.

Though difficult to define, Italianness does not derive from skin color or from culinary openness. Rather, it stems from a shared sense of belonging. The protagonist's rejection of the sausages, instead of alienating her further, leads to a self-affirming realization: she does not have to choose between identities since they can coexist. Her disgust becomes a moment of clarity, allowing her to reconcile and affirm her hybrid self.

Spicy Trials and Culinary Mistakes. Reciprocal Recognition and Hybridization

While belonging to a community—or resisting assimilation into it—may leave ample room for individual agency, it is ultimately the community itself that validates recognition and confers the right to belong. Manifestations of food-related disgust can therefore also emerge from the host group or society's perspective. Rejecting the food of the Other signifies a failure of integration, whereas appreciating their cuisine—regardless of how unfamiliar or divergent its flavors may be—represents a form of mutual recognition and successful inclusion. As carriers of individual difference, dishes with flavors unfamiliar to the dominant Italian palate become a space of either connection or confrontation between the migrant and the host society. Disgust, or its absence, thus reflects two equally possible outcomes of this encounter.

In Amor Dekhis' short story *La salvezza* (2002), the central tension revolves around *harissa*, a traditional Algerian spicy chili paste. The protagonist is invited to a multicultural dinner among friends and acquaintances (103). Aware of the compromises multiculturalism often demands (108), he decides to bring a dish that might suit everyone's tastes, but also adds

a small container of *harissa*, prepared in the traditional way. This sauce becomes "a means of expressing identity" (Goody 2002, 106) in a context meant to promote sharing and exchange.

However, when another guest tries the *harissa*, the protagonist's expression of cultural identity quickly turns into a source of conflict. Because it was not adapted for European palates, the sauce causes physical discomfort—"it felt like fire blazing down the esophagus" (Dekhis 2002, 109). The woman accuses him of being a murderer and warns the others not to touch his food (108). What was intended as a moment of conviviality and bonding ends in rejection and isolation:

> I saw it in their oblique glances: the party was over for me. […]
> I had nothing left to declare, as I was battling the monster of hostility invading my heart. I realized I was failing even at small tasks, that I was tolerated only for others to take advantage of me, and that I could not stand anyone in return. I was well and truly cooked in my damned isolation. (109)

Pezzarossa (2011) rightly argues that the diners' physical reaction becomes a symbolic rejection of Otherness, embodied in the *harissa*, and leads to the protagonist's exclusion. The test of mutual understanding fails. His dish—bearing the markers of his personal and cultural specificity—is repudiated. The community he had hoped to become part of proves incapable of welcoming his difference. The absence of reciprocal recognition results in exclusion and resentment.

This episode thus offers a critical perspective on multiculturalism in its practical application and contradictions. The rejection of the *harissa* reduces multiculturalism to a superficial coexistence of different culinary traditions—one that tolerates only sanitized, homogenized versions of difference. When cultural particularities are deemed too excessive or divergent, they are excluded rather than embraced.

Conversely, Gabriella Ghermandi's short story *Pranzo pasquale* (2007), while also revolving around the theme of spiciness as a challenge to acceptance, offers a contrasting resolution. In this case, food explicitly functions as a test. Alem's grandmother wants to assess her granddaughter's new Italian boyfriend, as "a man who cannot endure spiciness on his tongue will not be able to handle the fiery character of Ethiopian women" (74). However, this trial causes anxiety for the narrator, as it could result in either the boyfriend's rejection by the family or his own retreat:

> "Did you use a lot of spice?"
> "No, child, just the right amount," she replied, but I didn't believe her.

> She was accustomed to using spiciness as a trial by fire, defeating all the few White boyfriends I had brought home. (74)

Contrary to Grandmother Berechtì's expectations, the man not only endures the excessive spiciness—so strong that even Alem finds it overwhelming—but enjoys it, eating heartily. He also demonstrates familiarity with Ethiopian dining customs (78). When he accepts a second serving of *tibsi*, a dish of meat and chili, and compliments the cooking, the grandmother's skepticism gives way to admiration. The final test comes with the traditional coffee ceremony: drinking a scalding cup of coffee, which he handles with ease (79). By embracing and appreciating Ethiopian food and traditions, the Italian boyfriend earns the grandmother's approval. The sharing and acceptance of food here ensure mutual recognition, made all the more meaningful by the underlying risk of rejection that ultimately never materializes.

Gastronomic and cultural differences do not necessarily constitute insurmountable barriers. Rather, food becomes a site of both challenge and connection. Different cultures can coexist in mutual respect, without requiring hybridization or fusion. Simply accepting and appreciating one another's distinctiveness becomes enough to foster a shared sense of belonging. The effectiveness of the process of mutual integration, however, appears to depend on a reciprocal effort—both from the individual seeking recognition and from the community from which such recognition is sought. Lastly, the fear of provoking disgust may arise from a simple mistake. Yet such a mistake can also lead to success within an explicitly multicultural perspective of hybridization.

The premise of Gabriela Preda's short story *Piatto parigino dei Balcani in salsa veneziana* (2007) is the preparation of a personal and multicultural dinner by the protagonist. However, it reflects a distinct kind of multiculturalism:

> To make the usual "everyone bring something" a bit more appealing, I chose an *à la carte* ethnic menu that reflects my origins and my beloved homeland. Even though, to be honest, I'm not quite sure what "ethnic" means for me, given that I'd like to include not only something Romanian and Greek but also a Russian dish, maybe some Chinese specialties I tried in London, or even Italian pasta… In short, a dinner that truly speaks about me. (61)

This takes place in a safe and informal setting—an international student gathering before Christmas—where the community already exists by virtue of its cultural diversity. Unlike in Dekhis's story, the dinner here does not represent the guests' various backgrounds, but rather that of the host

herself. For the young woman, food serves to "form rather than express an identity" (Goody 2002, 118). She is already aware of her multifaceted identity, shaped by living in multiple countries, but she now needs to give it tangible form.

The long and careful preparation allows her to organize her thoughts and recreate her nomadic experience. Particular attention is paid to *salată de boeuf*, a Romanian variation of Russian salad, which evokes strong childhood memories (Preda 2007, 61-62). However, when dinner is served, she realizes she forgot to cook the chicken. So, she searches for a backup plan:

> I tossed a can of Manzotin [canned meat] into the salad, mixed it again, and… voilà! My *insalata beuf*, the star dish of the "Paris of the Balkans", was ready to be eaten! With a Venetian "sauce" and a hint of Manzotin flavor, but fingers crossed! […] They especially loved the *insalata beuf*, "because you can't really taste the meat—it has such a delicate flavor". I was about to faint. After six hours in the kitchen baking moussaka, Manzotin stole the show! […] Today, I feel like I made history, witnessing the birth of a new Balkan-Italian dish: *Insalata Beuf* à la "Parisienne of the Balkans" with Venetian Manzotin Sauce and Venetian Wine. A masterpiece. (63-64)

Though the Manzotin was a last-minute solution, it is precisely this improvisation that makes the dish unintentionally unique. The fear of having ruined the dinner—and, symbolically, of being rejected—turns into a modest triumph.

The dish's accidental blending of cultures and flavors becomes a reflection of the protagonist's layered identity. The *salată de boeuf* is not rejected by the guests; on the contrary, it perfectly and unintentionally embodies her experience. It becomes "the true triumph of culinary métissage" (Pezzarossa 2011, 107). The mistake gives rise to a rare moment of gastronomic syncretism, where multiple cultural threads merge through hybrid preparation (Morrone, Scardella, and Piombo 2009).

In these three stories, culinary trials and errors become a lens through which we observe processes of hybridization. This reflects a sincere form of intercultural integration, one that requires mutual acceptance by both the individual and the host community. The presence or absence of disgust confirms the outcome of this process.

In cases of successful hybridization, dietary habits blend, creating a multifaceted and cohesive identity that embraces both the individual's past and the present context without conflict or exclusion. Yet even successful hybridization carries a risk: it may become a tool for merging differences into a vague and indistinct multicultural homogeneity, ultimately resulting in erasure rather than enrichment.

Conclusive Remarks

The relationship between food and human beings encompasses multiple dimensions. The cuisine and the dining table are not merely spaces of conviviality among peers, nor are they solely about satisfying physiological needs. Through food, individuals can reflect on their personal identity and find affirmation of their social identity and sense of belonging to a community. This becomes particularly visible in the case of expatriates and second-generation nationals. The longing for lost traditional foods cannot cure but can partially process the trauma of separation from one's homeland, thereby restoring a sense of recognition.

Food thus acts as a tool of identity reappropriation, serving as a link to and marker of one's roots. For this reason, it often becomes a battleground in the processes of individual identity redefinition. The attachment to native cuisine and the pressure to assimilate into the host society create internal conflicts for displaced individuals. Italy's migratory context in the early 2000s is no exception.

In this regard, food-related aversion offers a unique analytical lens. Indeed, the presence or absence of disgust, as well as the specific foods it targets, provides a literary mirror through which authors with 'non-Italian' backgrounds reflect on their role and sense of belonging within the host community. A reaction that is both biological and cultural, disgust operates as a physiological and tangible expression of rejection toward elements perceived as threatening to personal and social integrity.

In the works of Wadia, Masri, and Lamri, we witness a rejection or partial negation of one's roots and distinctiveness. The newcomers enact a kind of hyper-identification with the host community. The desire for assimilation becomes entangled with the flattening of both social and, to some extent, personal identity, potentially leading to the erasure of one's origins and uniqueness in favor of homogenized conformity.

Conversely, in Lakhous's novel or Scego's short story, disgust toward the host society's food underscores the need to resist the erasure of individuality and Otherness. Yet the implications differ. For displaced individuals like Parviz, rejecting the host society's food and longing for specific native dishes aligns with the recovery of a deep emotional connection to the homeland. However, such polemical denial of the dominant taste can result in complete closure to dialogue. Disgust for the host society's cuisine becomes symbolic of a broader rejection of society itself, and a retreat into an exclusive and nostalgic sense of belonging to one's original community. By contrast, in Scego's story, such rejection signals a refusal of forced assimi-

lation and opens a space for the emergence of a new self-awareness—albeit one that is conflicted and continually renegotiated. For the protagonist, it is precisely her multiple affiliations that define her identity, even as they clash with the nationalist logic underpinning dominant notions of Italianness.

Lastly, the fusion of flavors and culinary practices introduces new challenges, as seen in the stories by Dekhis, Ghermandi, and Preda. The acceptance and recognition of a creole, multifaceted, and personally experienced identity often clash with a system that resists even the culinary incorporation of Otherness. However, when mutual recognition occurs, it opens up small yet meaningful opportunities for a society more attuned to transcultural openness. Coexistence thus becomes possible through genuine democratization rather than exoticization.

Within this literary analysis—framed through the lenses of food, disgust, identity, and belonging—several aspects stand out. First, these texts cannot be understood as self-contained or purely artistic products; rather, they draw nourishment from their historical, cultural, and social contexts. In ways that are sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit, they participate in the public debate on what it means to be Italian for migrants and second-generation Italians within a historical period marked by regressive trends in immigration policy and public sentiment. The question of what it concretely means to "be Italian" remains unresolved, though it seems intrinsically tied to the notion of belonging to a community perceived alternately as exclusive and closed, or as potentially permeable.

A particularly revealing insight is the way identity renegotiation processes described by these authors lead to an overlap—or even confusion—between personal and social identity. This points to a fundamental human need for belonging, while also exposing how societal pressure can result in a convergence of being and performing.

Finally, these texts present a complex challenge to society itself, laying bare the contradictions inherent in both individual and national responses. Forced assimilation and a naïve multicultural fusion both risk producing homogenization and erasure—strategies that ultimately serve to absorb or nullify difference, reinforcing a reactionary ideal of national purity. On the other hand, a defensive form of identity resistance risks undermining dialogue altogether or leads to an elevation of difference for its own sake, without effecting real change. Instead, syncretic contamination and mutual acceptance appear to offer the most constructive path forward. Yet achieving this still requires dismantling social barriers within a context of policies centered on the exclusion and criminalization of diversity—policies that demand the surrender of intimate individuality in exchange for social recognition.

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