

Interview with Kossi Komla-Ebri

Kossi Amekowoya Komla-Ebri, a practicing physician at the Hospital of Erba, Italy and an Italian citizen, was born in Togo in 1954. He won first prize for fiction at the third annual competition of Eks&Tra held in Rimini in 1997 with the short story “Quando attraversero` il fiume” (when I cross the river). He won fifth prize of the same competition, in 1998, with the short story, “Mal di ...” (... sickness). He won another prize in 1998 for the short story “Ninna nanna” (lullaby) in a competition held by the magazine *Famiglia cristiana*. He is the author of several articles published in the periodical *L'incrocio* and in the magazine *Progetto Africa*. He collaborated on the book *Afrique, la Sante` par Images*. He has written lyric poetry, several short stories, and a novel, entitled *Neyla*. “Quando attraversero` il fiume” was published by the editor Fara in the anthology *Memorie in valigia*. “Mal di ...” was published by Fara in the anthology *Destini sospesi di volti in cammino*. The following interview was conducted in Ponte Lambro, Italy at the home of Kossi Komla-Ebri on June 26, 1999.

Pedroni: Why did you decide to emigrate to Italy and then to stay there?

Komla-Ebri: I came to Italy somewhat by chance. My intention was to stay in France. Instead, after I finished my high school degree I had no possibility of continuing my studies.

Pedroni: So you did your preparatory studies in France?

Komla-Ebri: Yes, in France with a scholarship which then ran out. However I did have the possibility of continuing in Italy thanks to Bishop Lome` who knew Cardinal Lercaro at the University of Bologna who offered a scholarship for students from the Third World in an international residence college. At that time I didn't know any Italian and I said to myself who knows how this will work out. Also because in Togo there was no medical school. So if I wanted

to study medicine, the only choice was to expatriate. So I came to Italy, to Bologna, where I had a very interesting experience because in this college there were sixty students from every part of the world - from India, from Sri Lanka, from Zaire, from Poland, from Greece, from Uganda, and from Italy - living together. It caused me to change my way of seeing things. I experienced discussions of intercultural concepts and the universality of certain things. It was important for my prioritization of things, of life, that is of the relationships between individuals and in the search for a common denominator that all people share. Then when I had finished my medical studies in Bologna I thought I would go home to work in the hospital of Afagnan which is in Togo. It's a hospital administrated by the Fatebenefratelli friars. And in fact I had a contract with them and they said that they wanted to find out what my capabilities were. So they proposed an internship at their hospital here in Erba. I lived in the hospital and I enrolled in my specialization which was general surgery. When I finished the internship they announced that they needed a surgeon in Togo. So during the summer I went down to work with them. Then, since they had set up a project with "Terre des hommes" (a Swiss non governmental organization) to help cure children infected with polio, they assured me that they needed a specialist in orthopedics and traumatology. So, since I was no longer needed as a surgeon, I enrolled in traumatology and accepted a contract to work there for two years. In the meantime at the hospital I had met my wife and when I went down there to work she joined me to see how things were going there. Then I decided to do something serious about our relationship and so we got married. She then came back with me for the remaining time of my contract. The idea was that she would also work there in the laboratory because she is also a laboratory technician. Our son, Davide, was born in Togo. But we were unable to reach an economic agreement because they thought they could get the two of us at the same price because, since she was married to me, she should be

paid as a Togolese. But she said that I, since I was married to her, an Italian, should be paid like an Italian. In addition I realized, while I was home, that I come from a family of twelve siblings and that I was the oldest male. At the end of the month we had to distribute money and benefits. The salary that I had did not permit me to maintain my new family and to help my family of origin. For this reason it was necessary to make a decision that was not easy. However we went back to Italy in spite of knowing that without Italian citizenship I wouldn't be able to work, because I couldn't enroll in the medical register. Without being enrolled in the medical register I couldn't practice my profession. It was a vicious circle. Then I started working at the hospital in Erba without pay. I went on that way for ten years. In the end my mother-in-law was so desperate that she wrote a letter to the President of the Republic asking him how come my citizenship never came through. Perhaps it was chance, but strangely enough, when she wrote, the citizenship came through. However in the orthopedic surgery unit there were no openings. But since my wife was working in the laboratory and I used to always go there too and was already quite familiar with it, the doctor in charge said that if I wanted it there was a job for me in the laboratory. So I had to learn a new specialization and I successfully passed the exams. And so even though I had not been trained as a laboratory technician, I stayed there and my career has gone quite well.

Pedroni: The fact that you went to France for your high school studies means that you had learned French from the time you were little?

Komla-Ebri: Yes, in the schools of Togo French is the required language. When I got to Italy I was surprised to see that very few people spoke French. Togo was first colonized by the Germans. My maternal grandfather went to the German school. He was a catechism teacher and missed the Germans. One must acknowledge that the things that the Germans did are the things that have remained. That is, the infrastructure, the railroad, and so on. The French brought us a big bureaucracy that we have not been able to get rid of. They did not bring any significant development to the country.

Pedroni: Differently than a colleague of yours, Pap Kouma, you don't dwell very much, in your writings, on the problems of immigrants. Is that because you haven't had these problems?

Komla-Ebri: No, not for that reason. That is, perhaps because I did have them, but in the past. I think of them as the baggage of human experience. In France I tried to work; we used to sleep frozen with ten of us on a couch with our feet on chairs in unheated houses. I had to get up at three to unload kilos of fruit from trucks to refrigerated rooms; I had to pick up cigarette butts off the ground because I didn't have the money to buy them, or I had to go through trash cans behind the supermarkets at night looking for something to eat. I think I have gotten beyond these things, not only in the sense of time, but also psychologically. Sometimes writing has a thaumaturgic value; one unloads oneself, pours it out, and gets cured. Once you get beyond it you don't feel the need to express it. Pap wrote that book right in a moment of intense anger. I have gotten beyond that moment. But not even he would write those things now because he has gotten beyond them. Once you get beyond those things, I think that you need to write about something else.

Pedroni: So, then, in your opinion, is it valid to talk about "immigrant literature"?

Komla-Ebri: For me, no. Because in my opinion you have to get beyond these things. It was in part an idea of the publishing companies because they wanted to expose something. I'm not saying that it's not useful because it does give the possibility to someone to become aware of his or

her capabilities. However it's a step beyond which one has to progress. Then, if you want to grow as a writer, you have to come out of that ghetto and allow yourself to be evaluated on an equal basis with Italians. You have to look for a universal language, which does not mean talking about extraordinary things. The universality does not come from the plot, but from the message, from what you want to make felt. If I, with what I write, succeed in making my reader experience an emotion, that is an excellent result because I have succeeded in crossing the threshold of his/her soul and in touching upon those sensations that we have in common. And if it's an immigrant that is writing, it can be useful in as much as it causes others to realize that immigrants experience the same sensations that everybody experiences, and think and dream like everyone else. For example, I started a short story about familial reunification. It's a story about an immigrant in Italy who misses his wife who has stayed behind with their son. He would like to reunite, but encounters a thousand bureaucratic obstacles. But I'm not writing about immigration. I don't start out with that idea. I start out with the idea of personal solitude. It's about an African in Italy, but it could just as well be about an Italian in Switzerland or an Italian that leaves Puglia to come here to the North. But not to express victimization which doesn't do any good for the immigration problem. I don't agree with the idea that you have to write for your own people, because if you write for mankind, you are also writing for your own people. Also in the medical profession they used to tell me, "you have to practice medicine in order to care for your people." But I maintain that for a doctor it makes no difference whether the sick person is white, green, or yellow. In other words I did not become a doctor only to care for my people. Now it's obvious and inevitable that one talks about one's own life and one's own experiences, but through these experiences one hopes to find something that will be universal.

Pedroni: Then it seems already clear that you are not happy with the label "African-Italian writer" and that you would prefer instead to be considered simply an "Italian writer."

Komla-Ebri: That's more or less a concept for the anthologies since for years they have been talking about African literature in French, African literature in English, but there doesn't exist an

African literature in Italian. However I like being simply considered a writer. I don't want to be forced into any attachment to a continent or to a country. The fact that I express myself in Italian is contingent on the situation in which I find myself. I started during my high school years writing some things in French during mathematics classes, because I was good at math and I could allow myself this. But today I wouldn't be able to write in French in the same way. My mother was here the other day and wanted to read what I had written, which however is all in Italian and she doesn't read Italian. So she asked me to translate it into French, something that I could do only with great difficulty, because, even if sometimes a concept comes to me spontaneously in French, I don't use French anymore. I'm aware of dreaming in Italian. I no longer dream in French nor in my language.

Pedroni: I think in fact that, if anything, it is the language in which you write that identifies you as an "Italian" writer, but not an "African-Italian" writer.

Komla-Ebri: No, because I don't start out with the idea that I am an African who is writing. In fact, they often advise me to send my manuscripts to missionary groups, etc, because others identify you as foreign, African. Instead, for me the language I use and what I write have to please me in and of themselves. Then the fact that the writer is African may be of interest to the publishing companies who want to do folklore and present the writers like strange animals. Instead, they should simply be writers whose works deserve to be published. And we do deserve to be published because we are, without intending it that way, a source of enrichment for the Italian language because we bring to it something different filtered through our life experiences.

Pedroni: When you start out writing do the thoughts come to you directly in Italian, or in your African language, or in French?

Komla-Ebri: It depends on the theme. Certain words, certain sensations, sometimes come to me in French. And I look for the equivalent in Italian, that coincides with what I really want to express. And many times I have to look for synonyms until I find what really matches. But I start out in Italian and I write directly in Italian. My African language comes in only when, as in "Quando attraversero` il fiume," I want to express certain particularly African concepts, like

proverbs, etc. Then I have to translate the concepts into an Italian that reproduces the sensation that there is in my language. For example there's an African, Togolese, greeting that would translate literally as, "the day has fallen." But I preferred rendering it with "it has become daytime," which seems more effective to me.

Pedroni: In fact, when I read it, it seemed like those Italian words were the actual words that the African characters were saying. But also on a personal level, when you speak with your own children, aren't there some expressions that you recall from when you were a child, that your parents used to say to you, that come to mind? The way we speak to children often reveals the language that is inside us.

Komla-Ebri: Yes, probably, because there are some things that we take with us from childhood. For example, I see the unusual passion that my daughter has for reading. The book that I brought her yesterday, Sarah is already reading this morning. Perhaps because they have always seen the two of us at home reading. Just as I have a passion for writing, so do they. Davide won a poetry contest at the Forum Francescanum. And they hear how I use language, proverbs, etc. Among the first things that Davide learned was the metaphor. And I see in the things that he has written that he understands what is meant by a metaphor. And my language is full of metaphors. He has a command of language that is certainly superior to that of his age group. The teachers themselves say that he uses the precisely correct word when speaking. Sometimes at the dinner table, if I don't use the precise term, he corrects me. He is so precise that I remember, when he was very little in kindergarten and I used to joke and ask him, "when you have to go and do pee pee what do you say to the teacher," he would say, "I have to go and satisfy my physiological needs."

Pedroni: By the way, what is your African language called?

Komla-Ebri: Ewe`. It's a language that is spoken in Togo, in Benin, and in Ghana, because the ethnic groups are stratified horizontally. But the countries were cut out vertically. For example, if I encounter someone from the north of Togo we have to speak in French, as the lingua franca, in order to understand each other, because we have no other language in common. On the other hand if

I go to the south of Benin or to the south of Ghana and encounter a Beninese or a Ghanaian we understand each other immediately in Ewe`.

Pedroni: A literature question. Which Italian writers do you know and which do you consider most important?

Komla-Ebri: As soon as I arrived in Italy I had an Italian language teacher who had me read a lot of Calvino. So he was the first Italian author that I started to read with passion. I liked the world of *The Cloven Viscount* because it was a serious but imaginary world, a world of fables. My background was based on French literature, but as for Italian literature, I've read a little of everything. I've read Moravia. I've read Biagi too. I read anything that comes my way. Fallaci has a particular way of writing; Dacia Maraini. But if you ask me which Italian writer I like best, I'll say Calvino.

Pedroni: And the classics?

Komla-Ebri: As for the classics, you can see the deficiency of the French schools. We study Moliere and Corneille, but we don't study Dante. Whatever I have been able to learn about classic Italian literature is thanks to my wife who is really into it. It was she who also got me to read Ungaretti and other poets. And it's interesting, for example, to hear someone say that a poem that I had written has some echoes of Leopardi whom I didn't know. As for Italian history I'm learning that with my children.

Pedroni: Is there some Italian or foreign writer that has had a particular influence on your work?

Komla-Ebri: I like Kafka for his narrative style. And also Edgar Allan Poe.

Pedroni: But your style seems different than that of Kafka or Poe.

Komla-Ebri: But I also like Guy de Maupassant because he is able to express emotions in the limited space of a brief short story. I like short stories more than novels.

Pedroni: It's said that writing is a dialogue between the writer and the reader. When you write, do you have in mind a particular reader, or a type of reader or readers?

Komla-Ebri: When I participated in the Eks&Tra competition I knew that I was writing for Italians. That is, for Italians who are interested in different cultures. So, appropriately, I wrote for particular readers because the purpose was to compare our cultures. And some times this leads to exotic writing. But I would like to be able to write what I feel, before thinking about to whom it's addressed. Writing is translating into written form what I think, what I feel.

Pedroni: But is it to make these things known to yourself or to someone else? Who could be your wife or your mother, for example.

Komla-Ebri: No, it's never for someone particular. Sometimes it can be a personal unburdening and sometimes it's just because you feel a need to write; but on the other hand nobody writes to keep his/her work in a drawer. You write obviously to communicate with others. Otherwise it wouldn't make sense to write. But I don't think of any particular audience; other than in the case of competitions. But basically I write for everybody. In other words I don't write thinking that an Italian will read this or a French person will read this. I don't write for immigrants; I don't write for my people. Absolutely not. If I talk about Africa it's not just by chance; it's because that's what I know.

Pedroni: But I'll bet that when you write, you at least have a vague idea of a person with whom you are communicating and who perhaps will cry or get angry.

Komla-Ebri: In that sense, yes. There exists a virtual reader. It's essential because that is the most rewarding part about writing. It's the measure of success; whether I can cause emotions to be felt. For example, in *Neyla* you already know ahead of time that things are going to end up badly. When the person gets to the hospital it seems like a calvary in comparison with the hospitals here. Then there is this cold doctor that uses only technical terminology. There's no humanity. And in fact there are some doctors that talk that way. Also in "Manif" (demonstration), in the midst of total desperation, the mind latches on to something that is futile but which serves as a safety valve. And I have experienced this. The story of "Manif" is not a real life experience. However I have often experienced desperation when a happy thought has come to save me, to pick me up. I think that

people who don't have this safety valve can get into critical depression. Or you can retreat into an unreal world in order not to have to face up to the real world. Instead, whoever has this safety valve is able to survive. And it's essential. In fact, it's important to laugh. Sometimes I say that this society is no longer capable of laughing. I often say that white men smile, but they don't laugh. Partly because laughing means opening up your soul. It means creating an opening. It means a space through which someone else can enter inside of you. It's a risk. So you laugh only with someone you trust.

Pedroni: In fact, in the short story "Mal di ..." your African protagonist expresses certain impressions of Italy: "God, the cold! I didn't imagine how biting it could be;" "I think that here, the rhythm of life is such that time washes away feelings, devouring life and people;" "this country, this fog, is not for me, I miss the sun, the village festivals, the weather, the laughter of people, living together with the people;"ⁿⁱ that contradict the usual stereotypical preconceptions of sunny Italy, the Italy of festivals and of collective life in the piazza. Assuming that the protagonist reflects the impressions of the author, could it be a consequence of the fact that you live in Lombardy, in Brianza, in Ponte Lambro and not in some other part of Italy?

Komla-Ebri: Yes and no. Because I'm aware of the fact that for someone who comes to Italy from France, from Germany, from America, Italy is the land of the sun. But for someone who comes from Africa, it's the land of the cold. But above all here in Brianza there is the fog for which an Albanian friend says that it always seems like nighttime. In the winter at five o'clock there's no longer a ray of sunlight. There's constant darkness. But it's also true that in Puglia, which I know well, people are more open; people welcome you into their homes, for example. Even the style of eating there, with several courses, makes a difference, while here the single course is more in use. There's something I noted when I came to work here at the hospital in Erba. I was working with my colleagues and I was sleeping in the hospital. We would finish our shift, but no one would say let's go for coffee. The rapport between individuals was cold. In Bologna, where I studied, the rapport was different. The people of Bologna, when I would ask for directions, would go with me to make

sure I got the directions right. Here if they notice that you want to ask something, they cross the street. But there's an evolution in Italy, even in the South, toward cold rapport. In France it's always been that way. The French are withdrawn. They're distrusting. They have no enthusiasm for human rapport like the Italians of the South because they are part of this zone of the North where they give so much importance to work and money and human rapport doesn't exist. Or, if it exists, it's only in connection with the kind of work that you do. For example, my white smock makes me become almost white. I see it when I get away from Erba. Where people don't know me the rapport is different. Instead here they know me as a doctor.

Pedroni: It's interesting that the things that the protagonist of "Mal di ..." says correspond almost perfectly to the things that Italian immigrants used to say in America. And they are things that are well documented in Italian-American literature. They always complained about the lack of the big family, of personal contacts, of solidarity. Now here it is Africans that say these things about Italy.

Komla-Ebri: Yes, but there has also been an enormous evolution in the Italian situation. Just look at the increase in the number of nursing homes for the elderly. The patriarchal family of the past no longer exists here. Demographic growth is at zero. So there are no longer any numerous families. Even cars are built for a maximum of two children. And then families, even if they live in the same city don't get together often like they used to - only at Christmas and for funerals. There is no longer that close relationship of the big family like there is where I come from; which can also be burdensome. And someone who comes here for the first time feels lonely. Because you don't know the language and can't communicate with anyone other than to ask directions, but not what you are thinking or feeling. And you end up giving mistaken impressions because people interpret your silence as timidity. In reality you're not timid just because you don't know the language and aren't able to express what you feel. I remember one of the first times I was invited by a family that had made some cauliflower and I don't like cauliflower. But I didn't know how to say so and I

forced myself to eat it and the lady offered me some more. And then every time they invited me, they made cauliflower because they thought I liked it.

Pedroni: At this point I'd like to insert a socio-political question. In your opinion, is there something that the Italian state, regarding immigrants, is not doing and should be doing?

Komla-Ebri: Both the state and institutions like the schools need to undertake an enormous educating process to bring about the concept of a new kind of citizenship. In Italy there is no one-world concept. There's a lot of provincialism even among those that think that they are very open minded. They haven't understood that first of all we are human beings on this planet earth. Instead everybody has the train compartment syndrome. In other words, when they come into a train compartment they put their suitcase here and their briefcase there to take up the seats and the compartment becomes theirs. When someone else arrives and knocks on the door it's annoying because they have staked out their territory like animals. Then the new arrival, once accepted, opposes any subsequent arrival. It is not a welcoming culture. But the world is for everybody. It's only chance that makes someone be born in Italy instead of in India or elsewhere. You can't choose where you are born. So how can a child who is born today in Italy say that he/she is more Italian than me who has been in Italy since '74? I think I have contributed more. And yet he has more rights only because he was born in Italy. We need some education in this sense. The mass media are the worst. In my opinion they have no objectivity in reporting and presenting the things that have to do with immigration. If it's true that 4% of immigrants are delinquents, that means that 96% live normally; that is, they pay taxes and pay into pension funds, which is important given the fact that the number of retirees is on the increase. This work force is also important for production. It is important for future generations yet to be born. The second generation of immigrants does not consist of immigrants. Italy will be their country. They will not be content to do the jobs that Italians don't want to do. So we need a process of integration that will lead to a parity of rights and opportunity for immigrants. The mass media underline only the negative side of immigrants and not the positive side. They play a lot on people's fears. In every society people want to have someone

who is inferior to them. And it is easy to make this someone a foreigner or anybody who is different, especially if the difference is visible, because of skin color or hair color or whatever. And so it is important to introduce the concept of interculturalism in the schools; not the concept of multiculturalism that many think is right. In my opinion it is wrong because a multicultural society is a ghetto society. It means that someone lives on the first floor, someone on the second, someone on the third, and there is no contact. A transcultural society is an assimilating society. An intercultural society is the image of the piazza where people get together and different cultures interact and contaminate each other. I learn something of your culture; you learn something of mine. To use a simple example: Monday I eat couscous, Tuesday I eat spaghetti, Wednesday I eat Cantonese rice, and so on. In any case the schools have to give the idea of the rainbow. They have to understand that it is not only their culture that exists. The schools are not prepared. We have made some presentations in the schools to introduce African culture. And one of these episodes is in my piece entitled "Imbarazzismi." I call the episode "Etnocentrismo."ⁱⁱ I asked the children "what is a racist?" and they answered that it a white who doesn't like blacks. And I said, "then what do you call a black that doesn't like whites?" And they were surprised as if to say, "how could a black permit himself to not like whites?" For me the problem of immigration is a cultural question because it is linked to so many other world problems; for example the lack of democracy in Africa. Democracy would allow economic development so that not so many people would emigrate. With the fall of the Berlin wall Africa is no longer the balance point in relations between the great powers. Africa has been left on its own with the puppet presidents that we have. As for international debts, the great powers don't understand that they should be forgiven because as long as Africa is indebted to Europe, the flow of money will always go toward the North and people will continue to follow the flow of money. That's why we have to look for a way to solve the problems at their origins. Today they talk about globalization, but I see that as a globalization of egoisms where the international conglomerates dictate law to the entire world. I don't see how a Senegalese farmer working with a pickaxe will be able to compete with American threshing machines. It will inevitably

lead to a lot of injustices. It shouldn't surprise anyone that ecological trash gets accepted by the poorest countries. I'd like to know where those dioxane poisoned chickens end up. The "mad cow" is still being eaten in Uganda. The capitalist system has the future of a bottomless pit because if we buy five television sets, four cars ... then after a while we can't buy anything else because there's only so much you can buy. An "intelligent egoism" understands that you have to create the power of acquisition in the countries of the South even if only so that those of the North can sell their products. The huge injustices between North and South will inevitably lead to something because the movement of people will be unstoppable. Newspapers exaggerate things. The headline says "Clandestine immigrants kill," without specifying the names of those persons. By contrast, the newspaper does not say, "Pugliese people did something," but rather it says a certain person did a certain thing. Treating immigrants in that way results in penalizing all of them. It ends up where you're afraid to walk on certain streets because people look at you like "one of them." It just creates social tension. The mass media do nothing to help perhaps because they are looking for scoops and scandals. And the schools are not prepared. I see so many teachers filled with good will who ask, "if I have a Moroccan child in class should I concentrate on Italian culture or Moroccan culture?" In my opinion, neither one nor the other. The pupils should be educated in essential values, the values of human rights. Then there will be the peculiarities that distinguish the richness of each person's culture. We, because it is something that we care about, show, for example, the children here, the toys of African children. Here it is a culture in which toys are bought. The children don't make them. We do this for two reasons. One is sociological because it encourages them to use recuperated materials to make the toys. Not to copy those of African children, but to build perhaps a rocket made with tin cans and whatever they are able to find, involving their parents too. And then, most importantly, when they have tried doing it, they see that it's not so easy. Then an admiration is born regarding the African child who is able to do what they are not able to do. Because until now the predominant image of the African child is that of the swollen belly, with the extended hand that asks for money and therefore is in a situation of inferiority. In our presentations the first thing that I

ask is, “When you think about Europe what do you think?” “Development, money.” If I say, “Africa?” “Disease, war.” In other word only a negative image. But it is an image that has been created, maintained, and nourished. And we think that in order to build positive relations between people, you really have to give to each culture an image that truly corresponds to that culture.

Pedroni: Now getting back to your work, in the short novel *All'incrocio dei sentirieri* (at the crossroads), and in the short story “Mal di ...” you used a female narrative voice. Why did you make that choice?

Komla-Ebri: One reason, in the case of “Mal di ...”, was, in part, to trick the judges of the Eks&Tra competition, because I noticed that even Eks&Tra has its limitations. They don't judge only the literary value of what one writes. For example I think that they don't want to give a prize two times in a row to the same writer. So I said to myself, “Now I'll write something that makes them think that it is a woman who is writing and that way they won't know that it's me who is writing.” I was pleased when my short story won and the funny thing is that when I went up for the prize there was Tahar Lamri who was part of the jury and who didn't know me. When I got up for the prize, he was amazed because he was convinced that I was a woman. But aside of this joke it was also playing with style. That is, an attempt to enter into the female soul and speak in a feminine way and to express sensations that are different in male language.

Pedroni: Another reason for using a female narrative voice could be that sometimes we have certain emotions that perhaps we are embarrassed to express, but are able to do so through the female voice.

Komla-Ebri: Yes, because in my opinion males don't live fully, in the sense that they suffocate many of their emotions because a man isn't supposed to cry, a man has to be tough, a man has to be resistant. Women are more full and complete because they are able to live all their emotions. They don't have to always suffocate things. So, when writing, even a male can allow himself to live these emotions.

Pedroni: In the novel *Neyla* the presumably autobiographical narrator/protagonist says, “Thank you, Neyla, for reconnecting me to myself, to my people and to my childhood.”ⁱⁱⁱ Can you elaborate on the significance of this concept?

Komla-Ebri: Yes. It’s normal for an African who comes to Europe to live a kind of inferiority complex. The first thing you try to do is assimilate as much as possible everything that is European; the manner of dressing, of walking, of eating. Then when you feel a bit of nostalgia, you look for typical foods of your country of origin; foods which you would probably never eat at home; or when the feeling of loneliness gets really strong, many Muslims who never went to the mosque when they were in Africa, start going to the mosques here. Then comes the second phase in which you would like to reevaluate the elements of your own culture because you realize that no matter how much you try to paint yourself white, for them you will always be a foreigner. So you have to try to recuperate your own culture that you had been trying to eliminate. That’s why the various associations of Senegalese, of the Ivory Coast, and so on, are starting to pop up here, because everyone is looking for his own identity - linguistic, musical, religious, and so on. Then, in my opinion, there is a third phase in which you realize that humanity is the basis of all cultures. The peculiarities of the various cultures have a relative importance and have to be evaluated in relation to our universal rights. For example, I say to a Muslim, “I can respect the Muslim tradition because it is your religion and you believe in it; however I can not tolerate the fact that you consider women inferior to men, because that is a peculiarity that is contrary to our universal rights.” In *Neyla* the protagonist goes back to Africa during his first phase, in the phase in which he was rejecting everything, partly because he was ashamed, partly because, as Césaire said, we have not invented anything. Still today, my cousins say that whites are superior to us. Yes, we are rich in proverbs, fables, stories, but Africans have not invented anything material. They did not invent writing, they did not invent television, they did not invent the internet. And so, someone who has this in his culture can have an inferiority complex and think that we are not worth anything. During his homecoming the protagonist recuperated some of the elements of his culture and is in the process of

reevaluating things when he finds Neyla who becomes his intermediary. When he has to leave her, it is like leaving Africa. And going back to Europe becomes painful.

Pedroni: In the short story, “Sognando una favola” (dreaming a fable), you represent an idyllic scene in the future in which the grandchildren of an African grandfather and an Italian grandmother “were truly happy to belong to worlds at once so different and so similar” and the grandfather can say, “beyond our differences, we are first of all citizens of the earth.”^{iv} Do you really foresee or hope in a future like that?

Komla-Ebri: I hope so. I can only hope. It’s a dream. That’s why the title is “Sognando una favola”. Unfortunately, I know that it won’t be that way. At least I don’t think we’ll see it right away. There will be many changes, unavoidably, partly because Africa and Italy are moving geographically ever closer together. But the displacement of masses of people, the immigration that is going on in our time, is also significant for me. I ask myself how come, in this moment of history, so many people are on the move. Some believe that it is a divine plan. People have to get to know each other. They have to meet each other. Perhaps from this encounter will be born these children of bronze, that is, a new generation. Also out of necessity, because today Europe needs these working hands. Only knowledge can knock down the barriers between people. But it’s just a dream that our generation will not see and not my children’s generation either. But I hope that our grandchildren’s generation will see it. I say that it is only a dream because, as you see with what happened in Kosovo, there is no culture of peace, and yet this is essential. The great powers let ethnic cleansing go on for so long that one might suspect that they acted out of economic interests; perhaps to start up a new Marshall Plan.

Pedroni: Nevertheless, all things considered, you are an optimist and think optimistically.

Komla-Ebri: Yes, for the distant future, yes, because either it will be like that or everything will blow up. There are no real alternatives. Either people learn to live together notwithstanding their cultural and religious differences or there will be chaos.

Pedroni: Do you have some other literary projects that you can talk about?

Komla-Ebri: Yes. I have started a short story that is giving me problems because it has a completely different narrative structure. It's about someone in love who expresses his feelings to a diary. It's the diary itself that speaks and talks about a girl who confides her thoughts with "open heart" to the diary. Some of her thoughts are theological. I think I'll finish it sooner or later. Then there's another one whose theme is the divided life of foreign children. A child arrives and finds himself torn between the beautiful external world, Europe, that he is discovering, and the internal world of his family, where he is repressed according to tradition, even though he is his parents' "passport" to the future. He finds himself playing the role of intermediary between them and the external world because he gets assimilated immediately. In school, when they ask him to talk about his country of origin, he doesn't want to, because he is in the first phase. He refuses because he wants to be assimilated as quickly as possible with the others. There is, for example, an episode in which this little boy goes to the beach and stays under the beach umbrella the whole time because he doesn't want to get any blacker than he already is. And when the teachers ask him to translate so that they can talk with his parents, he tells them only what he wants to. Then there are some other things that I have started but left alone for the moment.

Pedroni: In any case you are more for short stories than novels.

Komla-Ebri: Yes, because novels are more difficult for someone who doesn't have a lot of free time because it's difficult to start up again after having had to leave it for awhile. While on the other hand I can dive into a short story or even lyric poetry and, maybe working until three in the morning, I can finish what I started. In general the things that I write in one spurt are the ones that come out best.

ⁱ Kossi Komla-Ebri, “Mal di ...,” in Sangiorgi R. and Ramberti A. (ed), *Destini sospesi di volti in cammino*, (Santarangelo di Romagna: Fara, 1998), pp. 126, 132, 133.

ⁱⁱ Kossi Komla-Ebri, Imbarazzismi,” in Ibba A. and Taddeo R. (ed), *La lingua strappata*, (Milan: Leoncavallo, 1999), p. 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kossi Komla-Ebri, *Neyla*, unpublished novel, p. 51.

^{iv} Kossi Komla-Ebri, “Sognando una favola,” in Sangiorgi R. and Ramberti A. (ed), *Destini sospesi di volti in cammino*, cit., pp. 136, 144.