

“My Africa is here”.

Female migration and self-narration

“La mia Africa è qui”.

Migrazione femminile e narrazione di sé

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OPEN ACCESS



DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

The article narrates the individual and professional choices of Julieta Manassas, a woman of Angolan origin who, after immigrating to Italy, undertook to train herself and launch an enterprise, becoming a fashion designer. Her creativity has led her to produce various types of clothing that express her style, her African roots and her passion. The article employs photos of her clothes and atelier to describe the origins, migration experience and professional commitment of this entrepreneur.

KEYWORDS

Biography, cultural identity, female migration, education, entrepreneurship.
Biografia, identità culturale, migrazione femminile, formazione, imprenditoria.

L'articolo racconta le scelte individuali e professionali di Julieta Manassas, una donna di origine angolana, che, in seguito al percorso migratorio intrapreso in Italia, avvia una propria formazione e un progetto imprenditoriale, diventando una stilista di moda. La sua creatività la porta a produrre vari forme di abiti che esprimono il suo stile, le sue radici africane e la sua passione. Nell'articolo sono utilizzate alcune foto dei suoi abiti e del suo atelier per descrivere le origini identitarie, l'esperienza migratoria e l'impegno professionale di questa imprenditrice.

Citation: Bolognesi I. (2024). “My Africa is here”. Female migration and self-narration . *Women & Education*, 2(3), 94-99.

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Conflicts of interest: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-II-03-24_17

Submitted: March 31, 2024 • **Accepted:** May 21, 2024 • **Published:** June 30, 2024

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

1. Gaining Awareness of the Existential Paths of Migrant Women: The Story of Julieta Manassas¹

As described by different studies, the experience of migration is a particularly important event in the lives of individuals. The life stories of migrants often communicate profound changes impacting not only their existence but also their identity (Ambrosini, 2006; Fiorucci, 2017).

The story of Julieta Manassas falls within this strand of studies².

The main purpose of this article is to focus on the identity processes of *selective acculturation*³ that took place in Julieta's path; that is, the cognitive processes employed by migrants to both learn about and internalise the host country's culture and to perform personal processing, selecting references, values and lifestyles belonging to each reference culture. In other words, *selective acculturation* is a complex individual process, non-linear and noncoherent, in which each person integrates— in a unique way— cultural forms belonging to the contexts of their original and host countries. It is therefore linked to migrants' identity-building process, which often presents itself in a conflicting way in second-generation youth (Cohen-Emerique, 2017).

We are interested in this particular type of identity building because in some studies it has been observed that processes of *selective acculturation* constitute the basis not only for successful training and professional paths but also for forms of social integration with the host country (Ulivieri, 2018).

But the choice to present Julieta's life story also allows us to broaden our gaze on female migration – often described as a double vulnerability – by introducing aspects that underline the strength of choices, faith in one's roots, and the self-determination of women of foreign origin (Ulivieri, 2017; Lapov, Campani, 2017).

In other words, descriptions of the phenomenon of female migration have often proposed the analysis of different forms of interrelated vulnerability and the plurality of discrimination (economic compensation, social status, sexism, racism, etc.) that have contributed to the representation of migrant women as subordinate subjects, largely bound to family roles, low-paying job, sexual exploitation and human trafficking (Castelli, 2014; Lorenzini, 2017). However, we believe that these studies should be accompanied by others that also reveal the emancipatory nature of women's paths, characterised by virtuous choices liberated from the social, cultural and economic constraints sometimes required by the host and origin societies (Bolognesi, 2010; Ulivieri, 2012).

The tool used to collect the story was the biographical interview, which lends space to the narrative such that the narrator can express, in their own time and manner, their point of view on the world, that is, their own way of presenting and interpreting their journey (Bichi, 2002; Monteagudo, 2018). This instrument is accompanied by the theoretical framework of reference of discursive psychology that interprets narration, and in particular the narration of oneself, as an instrument of common reflection between the interviewer and interviewee. The narratives produced are thus the result of contributions from both interlocutors, who clarify and draw inferences as the life account takes shape. In particular, when it comes to one's own narrative— as in the case of the interview with Julieta— the narrated events do not address the past for how it happened, but rather the past that results from the narrator's point of view in the present, also called narrative positioning. In other words, the person who speaks of themselves implicitly states that “this is how I want you to see me” (Mantovani, 2008, p. 54)⁴.

The first part of the interview, “From Angola to Italy: A New Beginning”, concerns Julieta's migration journey,

1 <http://www.atelierjulietamanassas.com/biography/>

2 Data on female immigration in Italy reveals how, for some time, at least half of foreign residents have been women: a phenomenon that has become increasingly visible since the 1970s, especially in the labour and service markets. In 2021, about 2.6 million women with foreign citizenship were counted in the census, representing 50.9% of the entire foreign population residing in Italy (5,030,716). (IDOS, 2023). In particular, highly qualified migrant women offer an important framework for understanding how the many categories of social differences (e.g. gender, migrant status and employment sector) are not always an impediment to personal achievement, but may also act in synergy to enable women to participate in the entrepreneurial market (Grimaldi et al., 2022).

3 The process of selective acculturation differs from that of assimilation and separation, two other identity choices of first- and second-generation migrants.

4 The narrative research adopts the biographical interview and other biographical materials produced by the subject at different times in her life as a tool. For the interview with Julieta Manassas, carried out in the year 2022, the following methodological criteria were adopted: a temporal criterion since the interview was carried out in two phases that allowed for an in-depth study of Julieta's narrative; a spatial criterion since the interview took place in Julieta's atelier; a material criterion since the description of certain objects (clothes, fabrics, sewing tools, paintings) highlighted the link between narrative and materiality and the maturation of identity and professionalism of this fashion designer made evident in the transformation of the clothes, in the combination of colours and designs. In particular, the reference to objects made it possible to give narrative depth to Julieta's story and at the same time to triangulate data, thanks to the use of “complementary sources of information produced by the subject. It is common for the person telling her story in the interview to have different biographical materials, produced at different times in her life. These materials are an important complement to biographical interviews” (Monteagudo, 2017, p. 45). The interview is semi-structured, i.e. made up of a few general questions that directed Julieta's narrative towards the purposes of the interview, such as: getting to know her migration path and the motivations that led her to undertake it; getting to know her career path and the personal choices that led her towards economic independence. The interview, conducted in two phases, was audiorecorded and then deregistered. The most significant parts of the story are included in the article as evidence of the processes of selective acculturation present in the identity construction of the interviewee.

the reasons that led her to leave her country of origin, and finally, the professional choices she made to stay in Italy.

The second part of the interview, “Old and New Roots: Inspiration and Cultural Interweaving in the Design of Clothes”, addresses the processes of personal and professional transformation that made Julieta a designer and entrepreneur. Thanks to her way of illustrating the colours and patterns of African fabrics and how they can be combined with the dress’s shape, we can glimpse the possible identity processes of *selective acculturation* typical of a migrant woman who daily seeks to interweave different cultural references, beginning from dialogues and discussion with other women who, like her, love to dress and mix tastes and habits.

The article is accompanied by images that aim to highlight to the reader the interweaving and mixture of cultures in the clothes, interpreted as mirrors into Julieta’s identity.

2. From Angola to Italy: A New Beginning

Julieta Manassas was born in Luanda, Angola, in the early 70s and moved to Bologna, where she currently lives and works, in the 80s. Julieta’s motivation for this choice was linked to meeting an Italian man, a geophysics professor at a national research institution, who for professional reasons stayed in Launda for long periods. In the early stages of their relationship, Julieta was a physical education teacher at a secondary school.

When their bond became more stable, she decided to quit her job and move permanently to Italy. After a short time, she married and began a new life alongside her husband, accompanying him on his international travels for professional reasons. Unfortunately, after a few years, her life underwent a sudden change following the premature death of her husband. This was a moment of sorrow and loss for Julieta, who decided nonetheless to continue living in Bologna, to continue feeling close to the memory of the man she had chosen. In the months following her husband’s death, his family welcomed her as a daughter. His mother, in particular, provided not only the emotional support that enabled her to face her grief but also a reference point that helped her understand the direction she wanted to give her life. This elderly woman, who had lost her son, was the one to introduce her to the world of tailoring. Julieta showed interest in the tailoring activities her mother-in-law carried out at home for her family. Her curiosity led to a passion for sewing and dressmaking. Her mother-in-law suggested that she enrol in a tailoring program, so Julieta began two courses. One proved especially important for the preparation and quality of training it offered: “*That is where my ambition was born, my love for sewing*”⁵, Julieta recounts.

During this period of training, Julieta met her current husband, who encouraged her to invest in this passion. She thus continued to train in the fashion field, enrolling in master’s degrees and courses on design as well as merchandising, drawing and cutting.

3. Old and New Roots: Inspiration and Cultural Interweaving in Clothing Design

Julieta gained experience over the years, opening her own atelier in 2009. She began to develop a clientèle who turned to her for dresses for weddings, receptions, and events. In her own words:

The customer comes in and shows me a photo of a dress. I sketch the design, take measurements – but first I need an interview with her – and then I choose the fabric. I am African and many ladies seek me out because they think I’m an African designer. But I’m not an African designer, because I learned this trade here in Italy.

Julieta became acquainted with the craft of tailoring and design in Italy, but her father was the one to suggest that she include fabrics, colours, and African taste in European clothes. A doctor by profession, her father began to send her fabrics from Africa, gifted by some of his patients to thank him.



For example, these photos show three jackets made using European patterns with both European and African fabrics, clearly visible in the collars. In particular, the white patterning on the black jacket, also seen on the sleeve and pocket, is reminiscent of African ornamentation.

5 The sentences in italics are taken from the interview.

Julieta mixes patterns and decorations, well aware that difficulties may arise in amalgamating colours and designs that customers may not like. Indeed, she recognises the coexistence of two cultural references in her sartorial art, and tries to describe how this happened:

I did not notice this interweaving. I believe it was the search for my African roots, and at the same time for my roots here, because I feel that I also belong to Italy. Therefore I interwove these roots and the “flowers are these”, as you see. I don’t know how it happened because when I came here, I was very young. I didn’t know who I was, and it was only when I started wanting to know who I was that I began to understand. I haven’t forgotten where I came from, and it’s been fortunate because thanks to the wonderful people I met here, I have been able to preserve my African roots.

The greatest complexity consists in cutting African fabric because each cut must respect the contours and colours of the fabric, which must match and maintain the geometry of the pattern.



The image shown here depicts the pattern of an Angolan cloth, Samakaka Wax. The typical geometric shapes that characterise it are recognisable.

When customers return from their travels, they bring the fabrics of the African countries they have visited and ask Julieta to sew them “typical” clothing from those places. This request sometimes proves difficult for her, because she did not learn the art of tailoring in Africa. They put her in a position of intermediation with the customer, but also with herself: it is challenging to make a dress with African patterns that satisfies Italian tastes while also adapting to different body shapes.

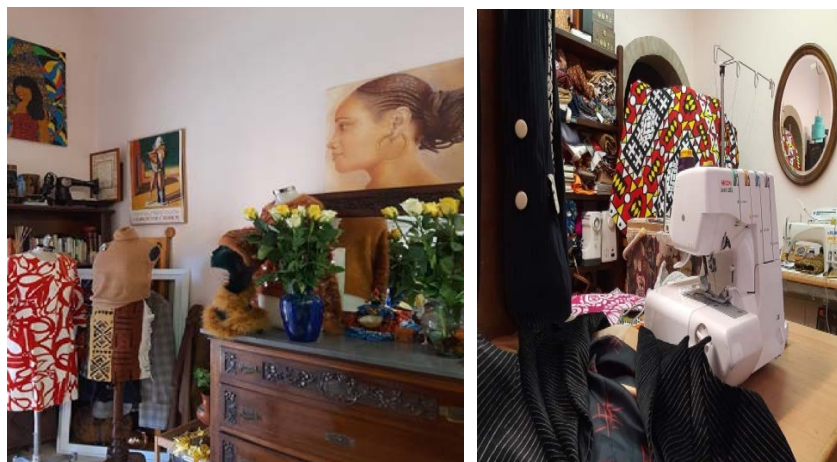
Another challenge for Julieta concerns her relationship with young second-generation women, daughters of parents from various parts of Africa who were born and live in Bologna. By listening attentively and grasping the interweaving and cultural changes new generations express, Julieta can address their requests with wisdom. Some of them choose Julieta’s atelier to sew their wedding dress in the European style, but with traces of their origins, with fabrics, colours and patterns that reflect the style and beauty of Africa.

In the future, Julieta would like to undertake new collaborations with the theatre, returning to design stage costumes. She has worked for the Teatro Regio in Parma and is therefore well aware of the sartorial skills required in this environment. She wishes to create costumes for film actors or opera singers as well.



Why? In addition to her passion for the fabrics and patterns of theatrical costumes, she wants to travel for work and become acquainted with other professional environments, people, and ideas in different cultural contexts. Thus continuing to compare ideas, match fabrics and create costumes that combine different tastes. One of her future projects is to organise events that engage and mix different forms of arts (poetry, fashion, singing, cooking...) to revitalise culture, circulating love and the desire for togetherness among individuals. Once again, people are central to the passions of this woman who has been able to transform her life into a work of art: “*I arrived in Italy because others brought me here, and others brought out my skills*”.

The photos below present two corners of the atelier, where objects and images illustrate the cultural blend that characterises Julieta’s stylistic choices.



One of her business strategies is to prepare “standard” patterns that, depending on the customer’s needs, can be adapted to European or African tastes:

I make my own little silhouettes in different sizes. I do basic things. I already have my own silhouette ready, which changes with the fabric. When a customer arrives, I suggest a pattern to her, but then I change it. If she wants it to be African, I make it African. If she wants it European, I make it European. If she wants something very simple, I change the fabric. The pattern is important.

Julieta does not feel like an entrepreneur, even while aware that with the mass production of her clothing she is able to offer work to other seamstresses who, carrying out small tailoring jobs for her, complete the clothes. She explains:

You know, I don’t work all by myself, because I also have outside helpers (...) I give work to small manufacturers, but repairs are made by tailors working at home (...) they are Italian, foreign, Ukrainian, Russian, Africans, whoever wants to work.

In recent years, Julieta has participated in fashion shows organised by European cities, such as Paris and London. Here too, her relationship with loved ones – like her sisters, who live in Paris and Madrid due to their husbands’ work – has made it easier for her to travel between these capitals and establish contacts with the international fashion world.

Julieta’s migration from Angola to Italy is the story of a woman who was able to transform the different events of her life into professional opportunities. A significant role has been played by her families, her family of origin in Angola, and her adopted family in Bologna, Italy, who have been able to support her in her choices but have also managed to offer her the affective security that every human being needs, especially within a migration path.

Many women frequent her shop, and this generates knowledge and exchange of ideas. Among these women, there are also young African girls who rely on Julieta’s professionalism, recognising in her originality, determination and a capacity for dialogue with the host society.

Conclusions

Biographical and narrative research, and migration research in particular, can serve several educational purposes. First of all, it can make it increasingly understandable to education professionals (teachers, educators, pedagogists, etc.) what are the processes of selective acculturation that affect the identity construction of migrants, first and second generation; moreover, it can contribute, again from a formative perspective, to the deconstruction of possible stereotypes and ethnocentrism precisely thanks to the analysis of stories of immigrant women and men who have had personal and professional success in their path of integration in the host society (Fiorucci, 2020). And the story of Julieta Manassas can be used for these purposes, as it offers a plurality of cues for educational reflection precisely because of the presence of selective acculturation processes found in the story of this fashion designer, in her ability to match fabrics and mix colours and, ultimately, to know how to blend tastes and cultural references.

Furthermore, the story of Julieta Manassas can also become a starting point for building a dialogue with second-generation young women. Highlighting the aspects of growth and maturation present in this story can help every trainer (pedagogist, educator, teacher) to support in every young migrant woman the understanding of herself

and of her own capacities, together with the knowledge of her needs and desires understood as indispensable dimensions for the construction of her own life project.

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