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## **ITALIAN-AMERICAN SELFHOOD IN THE REALM OF CULTURAL INBETWEENNESS PORTRAYED IN *SOMETIMES I DREAM IN ITALIAN* BY NINA CIRESI**

### **Process of Italian American identity formation**

The formation of Italian American identity is an intricate cultural phenomenon. It is not just a solitary psychological process but it is entangled in the multifaceted collective experience. Italian Americans have been compelled to continually negotiate their individual relationship with either the mainstream American society or with the immediate Italian American community, or with their residual Italian past. In such a context of cultural inbetweenness,

[i]n coexistence are both ascribed and acquired traits, conscious and unconscious elements, some deliberately chosen and others unaware; at times, this identity-making process can be intermittent. The main question in the debate on ethnicity is whether or not it is tied mainly to ancestry or whether it is largely a choice. Being of Italian heritage does not imply one's having introjected it as part of one's own identity. Ways of understanding and interpreting one's Italian Americanness are not only different from one individual to another, but even the pathway that leads to one's self-identification varies from one individual to another. For some, in fact, who have no connection to Italian heritage by birth, being Italian American can coincide with a chosen lifestyle, with a template to follow. (Serra 611)

Correspondingly, the novelist Nina Ciresi reconstructs the discrepant means, spaces, and results of Italian American pursuits towards the formation of individual identities. The formation of the characters' identities does not entail a one-dimensional referent in definition of their selfhood. Who they are is interchangeably negotiated over against southern Italian heritage, religiosity, and gender norms as well as American racial stratification, class bifurcation, and the American dream ideals.

### **American assimilationist pressures as the point of departure towards the redefinition of Italian identity**

Certain experiences of Italian American characters accentuate the imperative nature of the American establishment that forces Italian immigrants to redefine their identity,

placing them in the weakening, if not devastating, condition of inbetweenness, which, additionally, the characters are more often than not unconscious of. In Italy and within the Italian neighborhood in America, Angel and Lina's father is known as Carlino Pasquale Lupo. At work, he is called Charlie or Cholly. The Mama, in turn, remembers the hardship of Italian immigrants' children who had to succumb to American assimilationist practices:

Those were hard days—hard times! Right before we came over came the flu. It swept across the country and killed thousands of people. Children lost their parents, their grandparents. Imagine, they rounded those kids up and sent them on trains to all sorts of crazy places—Indiana, Nebraska, Wyoming. The kids, they had to work as slaves on farms—for Germans, no less. They had to speak English. They had to change their last names. They had to dye their hair blond. (72)

The father and the mother disapprove of the imposition of American names on Italian immigrants, but they have no other choice than to unwillingly adjust to the new American reality.

In contrast, their children, who overtly remind their parents, “This isn't Italy” (75), after all, undergo a more explicit inner conflict. On the one hand, they approach assimilation with no reservation. They are in favor of replacing their Italian names with the English names. Lina even hopes to become a movie star, something that she knows an American name can facilitate. Together with that, she would like to dye her hair blond. At home, she insists on speaking English and instructs her mother to use “artichokes” and “coriander” instead of “carciofi” and “callino.” When the Mama sends the girls for some Italian products, they bring “A&P brand macaroni instead of di Cecco, and Sunbeam bread instead of the crusty loaves, wrapped in wax paper, from Manfredo's Bakery” (81). On the other hand, while Lina does not want to speak Italian at home, in the external reality she feels compelled to defend her Italian identity when reproached with anti-Italian slurs. For this reason, she values Italian class the most because the teacher translates non-Italian names into Italian ones. Moreover, under particularly intensive emotions, she speaks in Italian, so, instead of never, she says “Mai” (88). Psychologically, emotional expressions reveal and develop one's personality. Therefore, it can be deduced that Lina speaks Italian when she most spontaneously expresses her true self. In other words, now matter how hard she tries to emulate American patterns, deep inside she is still Italian. Lina's inconsistent approach to her Italian name and language reveals the conflicting existence in the realm of inbetweenness. When confined by Italian conservatism of her mother, she seeks escape from all what is Italian, but when humiliated by the outside world due to her Italian origins, she struggles for the assertion of her Italian identity.

Particularly Lina's intermittent attitude toward assimilation in America manifests Italian American concerns with language, which is another significant referent in Italian American search for identity. Quite often, a conviction regarding the progress "from provincial peasant to modern American" (Carnevale 89) entailed the refusal to speak Italian and the determination to acquire English. The southern Italian immigrants, specifically, "knew that their language reflected their lack of status and power not just in America as foreigners, but in Italy where southerners have always been seen as less than their northern counterparts" (Carnevale 93).

### **Racialization of Italian Americans**

In *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, another dimension of Italian American characters' experience of cultural inbetweenness is racial. The characters are placed in the realm of racial bifurcation within which they have to decide to identify with either the superior whites or inferior blacks. Fleeing from the marginalization and poverty they experienced in Italy, they obviously aspire to attain the status of the privileged group in America. Already as little girls, Angel and Lina decipher the advantage of being white, so, as mentioned earlier, they dream of blond hair. Lina even hopes to marry a Swede in order to lighten up her family line.

The system of education also facilitates racial mindset. At school, proportionally, two black children are admitted for every Italian, which gives sometimes three black girls and two white girls in one sport team. However, both groups struggle for the assertion of their superiority. Angel remembers the black girls reproaching the Italians with "shouting taunts that ended with the phrase white girl, which sounded like why girl, why girl" (165). Sometimes, upon being exposed to stereotypical and prejudicial thinking, they call Italian girls "Guinea girls" (170), and imply their father's connections with Mafia, which the latter reciprocate by referring to black girls as "Nigger girls" (172). In the canteen, food fights take place between the two racial groups, in which Italian girls make sure that their group is as big in number as that of black girls. Although smoking and doing drugs apparently unites them as a way of standing up to the school authorities, there is no real mutual, relation-building communication between them. These moments serve more to articulate their frustrations. However, there seems to be at times a sort of affinity between the black and Italian girls, who resent oppressive Southern whites and biased Christianity. Lina mentions the Ku Klux Klan, Angel notes the Baptist Church, Terry, a black girl, points to the preachers in pickup cars, and Felicia, also black, refers to cotton. Then, like in one voice, they bring up tobacco, the servile attitudes of some black people, who they refer to as Uncle Toms, the restaurants Sambo's, named after a mascot-like black cartoon character (177). At the same time,

different schoolmates mispronounce Lina's name or use dozens such as "I bet your mother's a nigger" (79) in humiliating her.

In the midst of all these racial codes of communication, the Italian girls feel compelled to define themselves in racial terms. At one point, Lina poignantly states, "I'm not white" (179). She probably does it under the pressure of black girls, who see her as white, although, deep inside, she dreams of emulating white movie stars. This evidences her continued confusion. Somehow, though the school endeavors to eliminate racism by forming multiracial classrooms, the children cannot help it. Their external reality, the mainstream American society, inculcates in them racial mindset too deeply to let the school erase it. The Italian parents, additionally, even seek to reduce an interaction between their children and black ones. Angel explains the reason for electing Latin at school in the following way, "Mama had made me sign up for it so I would have at least one class that wasn't completely full of black kids" (184). No wonder then that Lina, in-between these tensions, once seeks to belong to the white privileged group, another time she resists it.

In racial terms, the condition of the characters in Ciresi's novel reflects Italian Americans, whose experience of

inbetweenness and the consequent effort to establish the border against the dark-skinned other required an intimate struggle, a context against the initial uncertainty over which side of the racial dichotomy the swarthy immigrants were on and against the facts of history and geography that inscribed this ambiguity on the urban landscape. (Gardaphé 6)

The sensitivity of Italian Americans regarding racial hierarchy turns out to be imported from Italy. In reality, already in the nineteenth century, northern Italians adopted European colonialist discourse in categorizing southern Italians as inferior. "The division between the north and south of Italy was often described in exotic or racial terms. [...] The southerners were compared to Africans, the south to Africa" (Wong 21). In the mainstream northern Italian nationalist terms,

the south represented an entity that was outside the scope of enlightened national unity. It represented a space that was at its best, mildly un-European, and at its most extreme, wholly African. The discussions of the anti-Europeanness of the Italian south provided the stereotypes, the vocabulary that would later pervade post-Unification struggles to incorporate an unruly and uncooperative south. (Wong 7)

At one instance, the character-narrator's reflections on race and femininity entail the reluctance of the Italian American neighborhood towards a black American woman researcher and towards the Italians of Sicilian origin. The reservation stems from racial prejudice that Italian Americans have encountered and assumed both in their homeland and in America. In America, they developed the notion of the Pockabookie Ladies, an equivalent of conservative Sicilian women, who carried in their purses varied trappings

perceived in northern Italy and America as signifiers of their backwardness and at the same time American dream aspirations. When Angel wonders about the content of their purses, Lina answers, “Rosary beads, [...] House keys, but never car keys. Laminated holy cards. A list of the Sorrowful Mysteries. A key chain from the Statue of Liberty” (202). The women’s conservativeness is discussed vis-à-vis Marilyn Monroe, an epitome of American beauty and success. In their conversations, analogously, Italian American women contrast American slimming diets with fattening Italian pastry. As a result, Italian Americans become convinced that the closer they imitate or maintain southern Italian traits, the “Pockabookie-ismo” (207), the more they adhere to the marginalized members of the American mainstream society, constituted primarily by black people. What the fictional characters experience reflects the following socially documented process:

many Italians, particularly those from the Mezzogiorno, encountered powerful, pervasive, and often racialized discrimination and prejudice upon arrival in the United States. Thus, if *meridionali* emigrated from Italy in part to escape a racialized social system that relegated them to the bottom tier, they entered another social system in the United States fairly close to the bottom again. (Guglielmo 35)

No wonder then that Mama ascertains one day, “we’re the only white people here” (204) and resents having their Italian names changed into those sounding like the “colored people’s names” (76). Mama emphasizes the fact that Italians, like black people, are considered in America to be second-class citizens and that they are compelled to detach themselves from their identity. Paradoxically, her daughters perceive her as a backward woman, whom they know they resemble, no matter how they try not to. Angel observes,

The very Italian-ness, the Pockabookie-nish of Mama—her need to shake the throw rugs out of the second-floor windows and her obsession with cleaning the lint out of the dryer—was exactly what drove Lina and me crazy, because we knew we had inherited some of it, and the whole thing made us feel nuts ourselves. (207)

On the whole, the characters’ concerns with racial categorizations represent a form of resistance to derogatory stereotypes that Italian immigrants were ascribed to and that facilitated their marginalized social status. Historically,

In 1911, the U.S. Immigration Bureau published their purportedly “objective and scientific” study, concluding that the “new” immigrants were harder to assimilate, prone to crime and disease, less literate, and were decidedly less desirable than northern Europeans. [...] What the commission said about Italians served to reinforce and shape the contours and parameters of racial nativism by separating southern Italians from northern Europeans and linking them with perceived darker races. (Vellon 26-27)

With its focus on race, Ciresi’s novel exemplifies “an emerging ethnic aesthetic [...] with a powerful return to realism about the continuities of history, and to symbolism

in dealing with the complexity of individual experience” (Hendin 14). After all, race has been a determining factor regarding one’s socio-political status in the external reality. Cire’s characters, like actual Italian immigrants, live in the conspicuously racialized American communities. The novelist’s focus on delineating their conflicting emotions relative to their selfhood reflects the intricacy of Italian American individual identity development.

### **Italian American femininity**

The search for identity of the Italian American female adolescents portrayed in Cire’s novel involves the need to possess role models that would epitomize integrated femininity. Above all, Angel and Lina’s mother does not represent an authority to them due to her conservatism, which brings about “the lack of glamor in life” (127) and contempt towards the rich. Angel testifies, “The thought of becoming like Mama made me shiver” (142). She remembers the depressive solemnity of her mother’s and other women’s black dresses and golden crosses at her grandmother’s funeral, the memory of which is juxtaposed with Mama’s controlling upbringing practices, depriving the children of the sense of privacy. For instance, Mama tended to take the girls aback by sneaking upstairs and suddenly opening the door to their room to control their games. She never asked them about their desires and aspirations, and defied other family members’ suggestions regarding the education of her children. When Auntie Pat discerned Lena’s musical gift, Mama refused to send her for the piano lessons.

Lina’s relationship with her mother deteriorates particularly when her mother slaps her face on finding out that her menstruation has started, indicating her greater vulnerability to moral depravation and sinfulness. Lina, in turn, instead of taking pride in growing into womanhood, temporarily withdraws in silence and anxiety. Obviously, her response is not evoked by an embracing consolation of her mother, a declared Christian.

Under the oppressiveness of Mama, thus, Lina and her sister reach for other female role models. Quite intriguing and inspiring for Lina is her aunt Pat. Although the aunt exhibits connectedness to Italian heritage, by, for example, reading *Il Progresso* magazine and coming to New York to see *La Traviata* or *La Boheme*, the value of which Lina at times is not certain of, Lina perceives her as a liberated and empowering woman. In order to escape the delimiting matriarchal household, Lina reads the biographies of famous women such as Marie Curie, Harriet Tubman, Florence Nightingale, Eleanor Roosevelt, Helen Heller, which she receives from Auntie Pat or from library, in hope of being able to follow the footsteps of the distinguished women.

Unfortunately, her unceasing condition of inbetweenness makes it challenging for her to define who she is as a woman and leads her to emotional instability. No matter

how hard she tries to flee from the confining conviction of femininity inculcated by her mother, she cannot help but feel inertly disintegrated. She confides she sometimes feels “like I’m two people in one” (133). Angel, at that point, as an observer and a more indirect victim of Mama’s oppression, remains equally confused. She is troubled by hatred towards boys, by jealousy of her more attractive sister, and by external expectations to take the sides either of Lina or Mama or her aunt. However, deep inside, she is aware of the necessity to define her own selfhood. Remembering her inner struggles, she notes, “I wanted to be on my own side” (161).

After many years, as a grown up woman, Angel comes to the realization that, since her childhood, she has never been permitted to express her individual viewpoint at home. Any opposition to her mother’s will and opinion ended in punishment. Psychologically, she has not been granted any space for self-development. In result, she retreats to isolation, a state of consciousness that makes her believe that only God has remained to talk to. She has no more desire to share her thoughts and feelings with her mother. She recalls, “From that moment on, I resolved to keep everything hidden from Mama. She did not deserve my confidence” (232). Before, in her resistance, she put on a mask of an obedient daughter, who never stood up to Mama. Although she did it fully consciously, still playing the role had a psychologically confusing impact, because it prevented Angel to fully participate in her adult life, making independent decisions, and taking responsibility for them. Now, she feels she has a problem regarding even her femininity, the development of which she believes her mother hindered. Actually, she becomes aware she had to repress her womanhood, for which she has the courage to reproach her mother only when her mother is paralyzed in effect of stroke. She says,

My crotch is on fire. I remember everything. You slapped my face so hard when I got my first period you almost gave me a black eye! The time you fitted me for my first bra, you pulled the tape measure so tight you practically strangled me! This is how I’ve turned out, Mama: I hate my job. I feel like some crazed bird cooped up all day in the office. But when I get home, I’m lonely. I shop too much. I overeat. I take a Sominex and go to sleep with the TV on. I screw guys I can’t even stand! In the morning I look in the mirror and can’t believe how old and ugly I’m getting. (266)

Angel comes to the realization that her mother’s frigidity and disregard towards body has violated Angel’s own sense of womanhood. It has a very devastating psychological effect on grown-up Angel, incapable of embracing her sexuality and engaging in a stable loving relationship. This, in turn, has an imprint on her low self-esteem, which inhibits her self-development even in such fundamental spheres of life as home and work. She also feels like a little girl when she is afraid to tell her father that she is leaving for holiday in Italy with her lover. The guilt complex affects her self-image, which



Dirk, the lover, makes her aware, inquiring “Why do you always define yourself in terms of your family” (341).

On the whole, Angel and Lina undergo inner conflicts in terms of their womanhood, upon being exposed to “differences between Italian and American culture, which included the priority of the family over all institutions and the individual, the matri-centric family versus the patriarchal family, and a culture of interdependence versus independence” (Tardi 97).

### **Class and Italian American identity**

Another facet of Italian American experience of inbetweenness is economic. Historically,

After 1890, the majority of “new immigrants” left southern and eastern Europe (Italy, Russia, Balkans) for the United States. In previous decades, most immigrants to America had been northern and western Europeans from Scandinavia, Germany, and the British Isles. Most of the “new immigrants” were neither Protestant nor wealthy; they were poor and less educated than the “old immigrants” that preceded them. (Messina 43)

Therefore, when the poor Italians reached America, strong class stratification had permeated the country for almost three hundred years. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants constituted the dominant class. In the South, the hierarchy had been sectioned by the system of slavery. Although it had been officially abolished by the time Italian immigrants arrived, Jim Crow sustained it. In the North, capitalist industrialization facilitated conspicuous class division as well, placing the black migrants from the South and “new immigrants” from Europe at the bottom of the social ladder. In a class oriented American realm, the Italian immigrants struggled to maintain their selfhood between their working class status and the external pressures to profiteer. They endeavored to attain a respectful social position with particular eagerness because they had encountered class-discrimination already in their own homeland.

In Cirese’s novel, the consciousness of class bifurcation in Italy is exposed by the attention that the characters pay to their language. Babo speaks with a dialect of an Italian villager, so his wife and daughters compare him to a “paesano” (21, 83). In America, his daughters do not want to listen to the accent that intensifies their inferiority complex. However, occasionally, also in this respect, Italian Americans undergo the pressures of inbetweenness, as does the character Lina, who still exhibits latent desire to learn and identify with her Italian heritage, manifested, for example, in her curiosity concerning the meaning of the non-standard, which is most probably southern Italian, expression “Chesi dice” (206), since she hears people around her notoriously using it, without even knowing its real meaning. She is torn apart between American aspirations regarding



fixed beauty standards, speech patterns associated with economic success and her awareness of, and even temporary connectedness to, her Italian heritage.

Mundane life and attitude of Angel and Lina's mother also reflect an Italian-American economic dilemma. The "Mama" seems to seek to maintain her Italian identity. She actually makes herself believe she is entirely committed to all what is Italian. However, while she carefully chooses Italian expressiveness, her numerous behavioral patterns betray her entrapment in endeavor to realize the American ideal of prosperity, which generates the condition of inbetweenness she is not really aware of. Therefore, on the one hand, in order to express her loyalty to Italy, she buys only Italian cheese and does not want the Swiss one and "pay good money for holes" (10). She regularly serves tomato sauce and penne with Parmesan. Especially at the moments of emotional excitement, she inserts Italian sayings, for instance, "Tutti hanno i sogni" (68) (Everybody has dreams), "Perchè?" (Why) (68). Other times, her utterances manifest pidgin, as exemplified by "If you don't yell, he don't capisce" (97). Her purse and immediate surroundings are replete with Catholic trappings such as rosary beads, "laminated holy cards [...] plastic figurine of an apostle, a virgin martyr, or some obscure saint" (68). Her religious practices mirror what in America is considered a typical Italian American style, consisting "of a strong devotion to the cult of saints, a deeply Marian" (D'Agostino 36). At this instance, Ciresi's novel inscribes itself within the canon of Italian American women writers, in whose works "Italian Catholic iconography pervades" (Bona 43) together with a critical commentary on it.

On the other hand, Mama avidly and regularly plays bingo, bets on lottery, and attends various contests in hope of accumulating a fortune. In the long run, her existence between two discrepant cultural contexts results in hybrid manifestations. On her refrigerator, she collects the magnets of the Pope John Paul II and of Pizza Hut, and all over the flat there are

The pink porcelain baby shoe with the purple pincushion in the middle.  
 The condiment dish shaped like a Venetian gondola.  
 The plastic Pietà on top of the T V.  
 The crucifix studded with seashells.  
 The coconut with the painted face that says, Welcome to Miami Beach!  
 The lamp that has a great horned owl on its base.  
 The Last Supper plate with the heads of the apostles worn off! (212)

In her household, she ends up serving Easter ham, following an Italian custom, and Thanksgiving turkey, conforming to an American tradition. Therefore, the Mama represents a particular stage of Italian immigrants acculturation in America that involves "shame and doubt about their heritage and a vague desire for new goals in life, which most often results in attempts to assimilate by adopting respectable, middle class values

and downplaying their Italian roots” (Goeller 73-74), with one difference: she represses the shame and doubt.

The description of the gloomy landscape of the Lupo family neighborhood underlines the general living condition and inferior status of Italian Americans within the mainstream American society. Angel recalls, “We lived in New Haven, where the murky green harbor smelled like raw mussels, and the sky, above the giant oil tanks that squatted onshore, seemed perpetually gray” (70). Lina and Angel would have eagerly departed from the monotonous life wherein.

Their neighborhood’s landscape is juxtaposed with an interesting referent in their negotiations of their Italian American selfhood, mainly the Statue of Liberty, a symbolic landmark. In general, immigrants were mesmerized by it while seeing it for the first time on the ships off shore. Mama reminisces, “suddenly, out of the mist—yes, there was mist, and fog—we saw her, the Statue of Liberty, holding the torch. *La Bellissima!* my father called her. The most beautiful woman in the world” (122). However, Angel and her sister find it challenging to work out their consistent feelings in-between the family members’ discrepant approaches to this symbol of liberty. Uncle Luigino, called in Italian Zio Gigi, is most attracted by it. He, acting as a man truly involved in politics and social advancement, and imbibed by American ideals of democracy and freedom, is ashamed of his Italian family background. The father, Babo, only selectively remembers the first impressions that the Statue of Liberty made on him and remains disappointed with New York and the quality of life he and his family have had since they moved in the country of supposed freedom. The mother, in turn, after a while, develops indifference towards it.

Initially, Angel and Lina, still little girls in hope of attaining the American Dream, side mostly with their uncle. At one point, Lena and the uncle find themselves in the dark corner, where the uncle takes down his pants. Suddenly, the idealized image of the uncle-the activist and dreamer fades, and the glorification of the Statue of Liberty ceases. When Lina shares the experience with her sister, only confusion and discomfort remain. The episode exposes the fragility, inauthenticity, and moral destructiveness of the American Dream, which forces individual immigrants of low self-esteem, such as uncle Gigi, to take up the roles of its propagators, in illusory conviction that they pursue it successfully.

### **Emotional disintegration as a trope manifesting Italian American identity crisis**

The outcome of the two Italian girls’ attempts to embrace their selfhoods is dramatic. In their adult lives, they are still tormented by inhibiting internal conflicts.

Angels becomes conscious of her emotional devastation. Her dietary habits deteriorate. Not aspiring anymore to attain the look of Hollywood stars, she perceives herself as “turning into a junk-food pig,” (270) which, she suspects, is a sort of lamentation coming “from the same vast and lonely cave within” (270) herself. Out of lonely desperation, she even places an advertisement in a matchmaking column, although she is convinced of its degrading effect on the image of women, whose bodies are more regarded than intellect. The outcome is a distorted relationship with Dirk, a German American intellectual, specializing in Teutonic literature and Goethe, fond of Italian cuisine. Upon his continued stereotyping and categorizing her, by way of, for instance, perceiving her reactions and speech as signifiers of “Mediterranean blood” (289), she feels “like some tropical agricultural product” (291). Suddenly, her past complexions relative to the associations of Italians with peasantry and the propagated belief in the inferiority of *contadini* or *paesani* are reenacted. When Angel and Dirk are in Italy, for a while Angel feels truly at home. However, it is partly Dirk’s presence that hinders her sense of belonging to the land of her ancestors and again reactivates her inferiority complex due to her southern Italian descent. In Italy, she becomes more sensitive to the bifurcation between the south and north, perceiving Italian reality through American prisms. She discerns the enviable similarity between the girls in Florence and her sister Lina in terms of elegance and style. In the long run, she ceases to feel at ease in Italy upon coming to realize that even her Italian is far from that of natives, who, for example, do not even use the idioms that she had to learn by heart at American school. By and large, even in Italy she discovers the delimiting nature of her struggle to embrace Italian and American realms that imbued her consciousness so profoundly that she is not able to identify entirely and consistently with either of them.

In America, in turn, Angel cannot fit in the capitalist framework. At the same time, no matter how detached she wants to be from her family that she considers parochial, she cannot uproot herself. She muses,

Even though I hadn’t lived in my parents’ house for years, I still carried the key with me every day. It was attached to a silver key tag that depicted the Vatican. The inscription said La Città Eterna. The key ring sat at the bottom of my purse, along with all the rest of the junk I needlessly toted around. (234)

Eventually, Angel reveals, “Sometimes I dream in Italian. I’m talking but I don’t have the least idea what I mean to say” (323). This epigraphic statement has a bearing on Angel’s lack of self-integrity. Still in search of her selfhood, she cannot define the meaning of her life and cannot name and express her latent, true needs.

Although Lina’s success is only financial, Angel finds her life enviable. Lina presumably has an exciting adult life, as she can afford face-lifting surgery, luxurious cars, impressive mansion, and fashionable clothes. Convinced of having attained the

American dream, she acts as an aloof assimilationist. However, certain forms of behavior and expressivity uncover her more unconscious than conscious attachment to Italy. She works at a Venetian Palazzo. She asks Angel to bring some typical Italian souvenirs from Italy. She wishes her sister “Buon Viaggio.” In the midst of this, suddenly, she attempts suicide - most poignant evidence of her unresolved inner conflict caused by the irreconcilable American and Italian ideals.

Actually, the whole family disintegrates emotionally. Mama, before she passes away, suffers from paralyzing stroke. Babo submerges himself in mundane life within his decaying household and refuses any assistance from outside. He does not want to hire a cleaning woman and the lawyers. He also turns into a racist, manifesting his anti-Japanese, anti-black, and anti-Latino prejudices. He remembers, again, the circumstances of his arrival to the United States, when he felt like nobody.

It was raining cats and dogs when the boat got to New York. We stood in line for six hours with nothing to eat or drink! When we finally got to the desk the immigration officers spelled our name wrong! We were too scared to correct them! We weren't proud in those days! We lived twelve people in a three-room apartment above a bakery! We ate day-old bread and were thankful for every crumb we could get! (243)

After many years of living at the margins, he becomes desperate and hostile to the American external reality. He even begins to speak Italian at home again. Young women like Angel and Lina cannot stand “the torture of hearing this family saga” (244), and they are incapable of forming a healthy relationship with their father resigned into bitterness.

## Conclusions

The existence between two discrepant cultural realms causes the unceasing sense of instability. The plights of Ciresi's main female characters, Lina and Angel, exhibit the condition noted by Fred Gardaphé:

Reinforcement of a positive cultural identity that was created in the home is necessary for the maintenance of and a willingness to continue that identification outside the home. If children get the idea that to be Italian is to be what the media and white histories say Italian is, then they will either avoid it, if it shames them, or embrace it if it gets them attention. (7)

Out of the shame of Italian heritage inculcated by the mainstream American external realm grew Italian American anxiety, resulting in personal and inter-personal disintegration. Additionally, the parents, entrapped in economic struggles and unable to reconcile their Italian value system with American aspirations, do not offer a firm foundation for their children's self-development.

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**Abstract:** In the novel *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, Nina Ciresi envisions the complexity of Italian American selfhood through the reconstruction of the experiences of post-WW II Italian immigrants in the United States and of the generation that followed. The account of the character-narrator, Angel Lupo, a woman in her thirties, constitutes a patchwork of storylines that present primarily her plight as well as that of her parents and of her elder sister, Lina. The identity crisis accompanied by the sense of hopelessness, self-disintegration, and emotional

vacuum that both sisters undergo in their adult lives stems from their attempt to reconcile their Italian cultural background with American ideals. Through multiple flashbacks, Angel exposes the internal conflicts engendered by the existence between anxiety-based Catholicism and American Dream aspirations. The characters' unending struggles for recognition attain multifaceted nature as they entail their attempts to define themselves and estimate their status in religious, familial, racial, and economic realms. These realms are accentuated by the Italian immigrant women's conservative religiosity, the circumstances of Italian migration from Europe to America, socio-economic marginalization of Italian Americans reflected by Italian American neighborhoods, fixed gender roles, the inferiority complex of southern Italians over against northern Italians and its transmission to the American context, the overwhelming pressures of economic advancement, American ideals of beauty and success, racial discrimination of Italians Americans, the inter-racial conflicts between Italian Americans and Black Americans.

**Keywords:** Italian-Americans, inbetweenness, American Dream, heritage, identity