Reconstructing Self- Identity: The Image of Albanian as "The Other"

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Abstract

The "other" is seen as a social construction, which helps the establishing of the own identity. To explore how self-identity is reconstructed through deconstructing the image of "the other", we chose to analyze the case of migrants, who are positioned as 'the other' and are treated as distant from the host societies. Albanians in Italy, especially those who have experienced the exodus of March and August of 1991, are at the center of the analysis, because they were the first ones in contact with the Italian society, after the collapse of the communist regime. The secondary data from the literature review and the qualitative primary data, generated from the biographical narration of eighteen people have been used to explore the phenomenon. In order to meet this research criteria, there are some questions to be answered which will help in solving the core issues of the problem. How the boats that arrived from Albanian coasts in Italy did create the image in the plural of settled people as "the other"? Which were the strategies used by these people to deconstruct the image as "the other"? How has self-identity been reconstructed through the time? The research pointed out that the image of "the other", as a universal process, is created more quickly under the influence of factors that make the "other" more visible, such as the massive exodus through the boats. Although the mimesis tendency was adopted in Albanian immigrants' case, pushed by the will for a positive social identity, the coexistence with the natives helped to rebuild the perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and identities, even though self-identity is a never-ending process.

Keywords: other, self-identity, immigrants, host society

1.   Introduction

"To appear always means to be seen by others, and this appearance changes according to the views and perspective of the spectator" (Arendt, 1978: 21)

This article aims to explore how self-identity is reconstructed through deconstructing the image of "the other", by analyzing the case of Albanians in Italy, especially of those who have experienced the exodus of March and August of 1991. We chose this category of immigrants, because they were the first ones in contact with the Italian society, after the collapse of the communist regime, and the first ones who faced the stigma of "the other" by the natives.

The article is structured as follows:

The study's methodology and the limitations have been described first. Second, literature review

helped to contextualize the image creation of "the other" in a diachronic perspective, focusing on the case of the Albanians in Italy. Third, the creation of the "image in plural" has been explained, through some data about the massive Albanian immigration through boats toward the Italian coast in 1991. The section is enriched with narration from biographies of people who participated in the study. Next, the process of "the other" deconstruction through mimesis tendency has been analyzed, through secondary data from literature review and from the narrations of study participants. The last part of the article explores how Albanian immigrants reconstructed their self-identity through the coexistence with the natives.

2. Methodology and Limitations

This paper explores how self-identity of "the sea people" was constructed, through the deconstruction of the "other", not only from the secondary data from the literature review but also from the qualitative primary data, generated from the biographical experiences of eighteen people, who lived the period of migration in March and August of 1991, sailing from Albania to the Italian coasts. The use of the qualitative method in migration studies is very common. Qualitative methods in general, and biographical ones in particular, help to take into account the context of any 'rational' decision making and the meanings and interpretations that actors ascribe to their actions and the actions of others (Iosifides & Sporton, 2019: 13). Autobiographical methods are also appropriate for studies related to identity formation. Hall suggests that "our identities reflect the common historical experiences" (1990: 223). Thus, in this article, using autobiographic qualitative methods helps to understand the process of social image and identity construction of the "sea people" in the host country. The purposive sample was used to gather the qualitative data.

Narratives of autobiographies have been gathered from people, carefully selected to cover a cross-section of migrant backgrounds and experiences. People who gave their biographies were from 38 to 75 years old where 10 of them were men and 8 of them were women. 14 people have directly participated in the migratory process in 1991, and 4 others focused on the experience of a family member who has migrated during that period. 12 people currently live in Italy, 2 in Albania, and 4 in other countries.

Findings from the narratives have been developed through the thematic analysis.

Some questions that drove the research are: How the boats that arrived from Albanian coasts in Italy did create the image in the plural of settled people as "the other"? Which were the strategies used by these people to deconstruct the image as "the other"? How has self-identity been reconstructed through the time?

This article's purpose is not to make an in-depth historical analysis of the Albanian migration in the beginning of the nineties, but it aims to explore how the image as the "other" of Albanians, who arrived in the coasts of Italy from the Adriatic Sea in 1991, in March and August, was built and their strategies to set up their self-identity. For this reason, what helped in developing all of this are the secondary data and the biographical analysis of the people's narrations who experienced that period. Because of the statistically non-representative nature of the sample, which is common in qualitative studies, the generalization of the findings is limited.

3. Literature Review

There is a very extensive literature dealing with the issue of "the other"(Beauvoir, 1952; Lacan, 1966; Hegel, 1977; Duncan, 1993; Crang, 1998; Staszak, 2008), but this article referred to the Staszak definition (2008:2), according to whom, "the construction of "the otherness" is the result of a discursive process, by which the dominant in-group constructs one or many dominated out-groups, by stigmatizing a difference- real or imagined- presented as a negation of the identity…". According to him (Staszak, 2008), geography serves as a factor that has reproduced the otherness, especially the Western construction of otherness. Also, according to Levinas (1948), the other is a neighbor, and the self is constituted in its relation with that other-as-neighbor.

Hegel's idea of "…I do not exist unless there is the Other…" (1977) serves as a contribution to understanding self-identity as a construction with the others or better saying a social identity. Many other scholars have spoken about different approaches to identity (Mead, 1967; Isaacs, 1975; Tajfel and Tuner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981; Giddens, 1991, Maalouf, 2001; Bauman, 2003), but in this paper, we refer to the Theory of Social Identity given by Tajfel. "Social identity" is defined as "that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group/ groups together with the value and emotional significance of that membership" (Tajfel, 1981: 255). Such identification gives way to the protection and strengthening of self-identity. Maximizing the positive qualities of the group in which the individual belongs and minimizing the positive qualities of the other group leads to the increased differences between the two groups.

Although the focus of this article is not to give a historical overview of Albanian immigration to Italy, it is worth considering some data of Albanian migration toward Italy in a diachronic perspective, to contextualize the creation of the image of Albanian as "the other" in the Italian society.

During the communist regime (1945-1990), Albania has been one of the most isolated countries in the world, with very low standards of living, compared with the other Eastern European countries. Since 1990, the country has been facing an unstable political situation, with social insecurity and extreme economic poverty. Unemployment affected about 40% of the population, the average monthly salary reached $20, inflation grew steeply, and the industrial and agricultural sectors were collapsing (Mary Ward Loreto Foundation, 2019: 14).

Despite their isolation, through television channels and radio broadcasts, Albanians secretly followed the developments of various countries around the world, especially of those geographically close countries like Italy and Greece, creating the dream of "a promised land" beyond the borders of Albania.

The first wave of Albanian post-communist migration took place in the mid-1990s, when about 5,000 Albanians invaded some of the Western embassies in Tirana. This was marked as the symbolic act of 'migration' on foreign soil (Ibid), or better a "sign" of it because the most symbolic mass migration of Albanians was to follow with boatloads of them, which arrived on the southeastern coast of Italy in 1991 (Misja, 1998: 18). Italy, only 40 miles away from the Albanian coast, became very attractive for many Albanians, especially at the beginning of the 1990s. The first massive exodus was that of March 1991. Around 28,000 Albanian people arrived in Italian coasts at that time (Ibid). The Albanians were kept waiting in rows in Brindisi and in military accommodations for some days before the Italian government decided to accept them (King & Mai, 2002).

During the first Albanian democratic elections held on March 31st 1991, the Communist Party won two-thirds of the seats, but their victory made many people lose hope that the system of the liberal democracy would ever be installed in Albania. This was considered as the main reason that ignited Albanians towards another massive exodus.

The second exodus of this phase is known as the Exodus of August with over 20,000 Albanians reaching Italy and being repatriated after being closed for several days at the Bari Stadium (Devole, 2008: 10). The Albanians of the Embassies and those of March 1991 have been treated as refugees because of the difficult political situation in Albania, but the ones who immigrated in August 1991 were not considered political refugees. Albania had other democratic elections in March 1991.

According to King and Vullnetari (2003), much of the movement of the post-communist period in Albania has been chaotic, clandestine, and hence poorly recorded. The post-communist Albanian migratory crises of the 1990s inaugurated a new phase in the history of the relationship between Italy and Albania and transformed their imaginary, socioeconomic, and cultural liaisons (Mai, 2011: 4).

In addition to the "Embassy phase" and the "Mass exodus of 1991", other phases of this emigration have occurred from 1991 until now. During 1993-1996 a large number of Albanian immigrants, mainly unemployed, landed clandestinely off the Italian coast.

After the Pyramid crisis in Albania in 1997, another flux of 18.000 emigrants addressed to Italy. This raised great concern in Italian public opinion and led to major investment in Albania in an attempt to restore order and limit the impact on Italy (Chaloff, 2008: 7). After the Kosovo crisis in 1999, many

Albanians from Albania mixed with Albanian from Kosovo land along the Italian coasts. Even though after the 2000s there was no mass influx of migrants to Italy, also due to the increase of maritime border control by the Italian and Albanian authorities, the emigration of Albanians to Italy has continued in other forms such as family reunifications, labor contracts, and other forms of chain migration. According to ISTAT the number of Albanians in Italy until December 31, 2019, was 440.850 inhabitants and composes 8.3 percent of all the foreign population in Italy[1].

It is worth mentioning that the communist regime in Albania lasted almost the same as Christian Democracy in Italy. After the collapse, Italy was given new strong recommendations by the European integration. The crisis of the early 1990's in Albania allowed Italy to exercise responsible foreign policy, on one hand directing humanitarian operations in Albania, and on the other hand by tightening attitudes towards immigration, especially on the eastern border of Adriatic (King& Mai, 2008: 6). Unlike Albania, which in the late 1980's experienced an extreme economic crisis, Italy's GDP per capita was above the OECD average by 1980's and continued since the mid 1990's (Pinelli et al, 2012). This socio-economical difference between two countries takes an important significance on understanding the Italian-Albanian relationship onward.

Italian-Albanian relations did not start in the early 1990's, of course. In the first part of the century these relations were shaped by Italian imperialist. When Italy's Fascist government came to power, Italy gradually reestablished its grip on Albania, launching it as an informal protectorate that later gained full protectorate status. The political coalition that brought Italy out of the Second World War built the Italian Republic around its democratic constitution, reshaping national identity around the values of the anti-Fascist liberation movement. The take-over of the communist regime in postwar Albania broke the close relationship between the two sides of the Adriatic. Eventually, not only Italian memory of colonialism in Albania but the neighboring country itself gradually disappeared from Italian collective representations. At the institutional level, Italy had almost no foreign policy towards Albania. Only during the 1980's Italy eventually made some efforts to undermine Hoxha regime, but these were weaker than those of other western countries. Italian TV images of a prosperity unknown to Albanians appeared at a time when Albania was facing a devastating economic crisis and, at the beginning of the 1990's, the regime's narrative of the "misery of capitalism" seemed like a terrible farce (Chiodi & Devole, 2006).

4. The Boats and the Image in Plural of "The Others"

The mass migration profoundly affected Italian public opinion and the future perception of migration in general in Italy; even today, these rusty ships reappear in newspapers to symbolize immigration (Chaloof, 2008: 5). It was just the beginning of what is called "the culture of immigration" that would support movers and non-movers and would facilitate network building between origin and destination populations (Cohen, 2004).

S.S a woman 38 years old, describing her experience of immigration, stopped at childhood memories:

> *"I remember my father came home early that day, which was unusual of him. He sat next to my grandmother and mother and whispered as he did not want to disrupt our peace. ' All my friends are begging me to go, I also think I should". My mother went silent. My grandmother put her hand on top of my father's hand saying: ' If you love me just a little bit, please do not go '. Some people looked at the exodus as the beginning of a long cavalry of struggles. They hoped that Albania had just begun to change, and it would give them all the possibilities of a better life that people were looking to pursue abroad. My father never left, but I wish he had".*

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[1] *https://www.tuttitalia.it/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri/albania/ Albanesi in Italia - statistiche e distribuzione per regione. Accessed on 02 January 2021*

The famous Albanian photographer Gani Xhengo took the mythical photos depicting ships with thousands of people in the port of Durrës, departing for Italy in August 1991. Lost in an emotional past, he remembers:

Source: http://www.panorama.com.al/eksodi-biblik-porti-i-durresit-para-25-vitesh-ne-fotografi/

"The photo was taken on August 7, 1991 in Durrës. It was a beautiful sunny day, not windy. as it is usually in Durrës. "Vlora" ship was holding about twenty to twenty-five thousand citizens. In the port's landline, about one kilometer long, were about five times more people following the situation that was created. The distance from the ground to the ship was approximately one hundred meters. This distance also held dozens of others who wanted to board this ship, fighting with the sea... At all costs they wanted to get on the boat. Even though the boat was full...they tried. They kept trying. A dramatic atmosphere was created in the port, a difficult, heavy, shocking atmosphere, for all of those watching and for myself. Of course, even today the August exodus is remembered as very dramatic and spectacular. Something like this was probably never seen anywhere in the world. This photograph along with many others were used as advertisements in Europe"[2].

"Vlora", a ship called after one of the most important cities in Albania, was transporting sugar from Cuba, and had been transformed into a symbol of the immigration flow of Albanians toward Italy at the beginning of the 90's. Thousands of people, some of them armed, obliged the captain of the ship to go to Brindisi (around 150 km away from Durrës), but the Italian authority changed the direction of the ship, sending it to Bari. People were sheltered in "Stadio della Vittoria" in Bari, some of them had been deported, and some others had found a way to escape from the stadium (Morgoglione, 2012).

In an interview given in 2016, Mr. Nicola Montano, the head of Bari Port Customs Police, at that time, shows:

"People screamed 'Viva l'Italia!'. It was like being in a stadium where the national team played, but the fans were not Italian, but rather Albanians on a ship. It was also a beautiful moment of reflection. How was it possible that despite their situation they were so happy? Hadn't they read the Italian newspapers that stated Albanians had to go home?" (Esparza, 1991).

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[2] *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv7xE_90AwY*

It is not by accident that the population of Bari in Italy was massively mobilized, making an astonishing and startling reception for refugees from Albania. Despite the initial reactions, the media of that time lined up in solidarity with the Albanians settled in their country. The images of desperation – in a period when Italian public opinion was still caught up in the enthusiasm over the collapse of Berlin Wall – were met with solidarity. In March of 1991, immigrants' ships were welcomed as 'Adriatic brothers' escaping from 'darkness of communism' (Zinn, 1996: 241-49). At that time Martelli Law granted to these immigrants, work, and residence rights. But soon, fearing the arrival of another large influx of refugees from Albania, Italian government officials categorically refused their admission and were determined to discourage the arrival of others through the forced repatriation of these immigrants. By the mid 1990's, unregulated traffic of immigrants, drugs and arms across the Straits of Otranto had become a visible problem for police and public opinion. During this period, intense activity by Italian Coast Guard and border authorities led to numerous naval interceptions. Thousands of Albanians were sent back without ever setting foot on dry land or caught near the beach shortly after landing in Puglia (Chaloff, 2008: 6-7).

Some of the questions that arise are: How did ships, which arrived in Italy from Albanian coasts, create the image of "the others" for the settled people? How differences on political, economic, social and cultural settings between Albania and Italy in the beginning of the 90's have contributed on this process?

M.R., 65 years old, was 35 when he landed for the first time in Italy by the ship. He lived in Durrës, a city 37 km away from Tirana, the capital of Albania. M. was one of the first people to have information about the "opened gates" of the Durrës Port.

> *"I remember that day very vividly. There were six of us (friends) waiting for the right moment to board the ship. We came in Italy with a motorboat called "Alba", and we felt like it was a sunrise for us, the sunrise of hope, the sunrise of a better life.*
> *The biggest concern I had was the fact that I had not informed my wife of my departure. There were no mobiles at that time. There were about six hundred people on the motorboat. We figured that some other friends were on the same boat as it was normal to board the boats but abnormal to stay in Albania. After two days of cruising, the boat reached the Italian coast on March 6, 1991. I was faced with the most challenging experience of my life, full of expectations, but also full of dilemmas. In Italy people were generous with us, but they knew nothing about us. They thought we were primitive people, "people with a tail", but we were just people in search of our dignity…"*

According to King and Mai "the ship is a symbol of the 'immigrating crowd', since it gathers the greatest mass of immigrants in a single confined space, berthing on the shore of 'fortress Europe'. The images filled the Italian TV screens and the pages of the print media, not to mention a controversial Benetton poster and Gianni Amelio's celebrated film L'America (1994)" (King & Mai, 2008). Such images created the perception that Albanian immigrants were clandestine, illegal, and uncivilized. The image of the ships in Italian coasts helped the creation of the immigrants' image in plural there, meanwhile in other Western Countries, Albanian immigration has been "less spectacular".

According to Ferruccio, the perceptions of Italian (and Greek as well) authorities about Albanian immigration as a 'crisis' and a kind of desperate emergency, have led to Albanians being portrayed as dangerous immigrants coming from a country in crisis. Albanian immigration is constantly associated with predictions of bankruptcy. Above all, Albanians have been stigmatized and associated with criminality and moral degradation, in particular drugs, smuggling, violent behavior and prostitution, and more generally poverty and misery (Ferrucio, 1998). According to Jelloun "Poverty has always been badly received and has been the cause of rejection and exclusion. Change can only be accepted with the condition that the individual is wealthy, or at least there are means to hide and make this change invisible" (Jellown, 2008). Campani stressed the fact that the reaction has been strongly driven by Italian media, which has a tradition of stereotyping immigrants: before the arrival of Albanians, Moroccans and Tunisians were routinely associated with crimes such as drug-dealing and theft (Campani, 2001).

As a matter of fact, Italian media, has strongly influenced before the 1990s as well, on the immigration of Albanians to Italy. According to Nick Mai, the Italian television serves as a 'catalyst' for immigration of Albanians toward Italy (Mai, 2005). "Migratory flows seem to implicitly conceive of the relation between media consumption and mobility in terms of a magnetic attraction of countries who 'watch' Western television programs (and 'send' immigrants) to countries who 'send' television programs (and 'receive' immigrants in return)" (Mai, 2004: 4). Through watching Italian television many Albanians, especially the youngest ones, had internalized the language and elements of Italian culture, getting involved quite naturally in a process known as anticipatory assimilation or pre-integration, as mentioned by Alberoni and Baglioni (1965). Years of watching Italian television had given most young Albanians a reasonable command of the Italian language – an invaluable head start should they end up by migrating there (Mai, 2011: 6).

The first wave of Albanians migrating to Italy carried with them the stories of Albanian farmers giving shelter to Italian soldiers fleeing from Nazi forces. The invocation of these stories probably not only revealed Albanian expectations in the first years after the collapse of the regime but was probably also an attempt to interpret the initial welcome of Italian people as reciprocation for Albanian hospitality almost five decades earlier. However, as mentioned above, Italian hospitality was short-lived and here there was no collective memory of the unpleasant involving Italian soldiers in Albania so many years ago. (Chiodi & Devole, 2006: 3-7), so Albanian were considered by Italian people just like "foreigners" and "the others".

The tendency of using the division "we" and "the others" is universal. All groups tend to value themselves and distinguish themselves from the Others whom they devalue. The ethnocentric bias that creates otherness is constructed by the discourse and the practice throughout history. According to Levinass (1987: 77), "the connection to the other is the connection to the future". Staszak states that "Western societies use the otherness for two main reasons: first, these societies are driven by the logic attached to the principle of identity, that has produced a number of binaries (positive terms versus negative terms). Second, the process of colonization allowed the West to transmit its values, related with religion and science, and expand the categories of identity and otherness" (Staszak, 2008: 3).

Mai explains the tendency of Italians to consider Albanian immigrants as the "others" in the beginning of the 1990-s as following:

> *"The 1990s Albanians, both because of their shared somatic traits and of their common denied colonial status, were both identified with and substituted for the Italian Southerner as the main constitutive other against which to articulate a civilized and democratic Italian identity in relation to Italy's aspirational belonging to the West. Because of their physical and cultural 'sameness' and their foreign status, Albanians were perceived as the simultaneous living embodiment both of Italy's primordial 'constitutive other', the Italian Southerner, and of the new constitutive 'other', the foreign immigrant of the 1990s."* (Mai, 2003: 91).

As described by Vehbiu and Devole (1996), Albanians came to constitute the first source of fear among Italians. As such, Albanians were perceived as the "others" and new prejudices have been arisen in Italian public opinion.

5. A Strategy of Deconstructing "The Other": Mimesis

The concept of mimesis (acting as natives) refers to a practice spread among immigrants who hide their identity and try to look as citizens of host country, being under pressure of the public opinion of the host country that discriminates and at the same time invite them to be assimilated (Romania, 2004).

The Theory of Social Identity helps to understand why the host country, Italy, and the natives tried to create an image in plural for immigrants. Albanian immigrants tried to act individually, at least at the beginning of the immigration experience. Turner describes the in-group and out-group relationship as entailing a "competition for positive identity," out-group categorizations strategically framed to maximize self-evaluations (Turner, 1975: 10). According to Italian sociologist Laura Zanfrini,

there is an innate tendency of man to seek a positive social identity (Zanfrini, 2007: 88). Many Albanians, in the beginning, adopted the strategy of mimesis, seeking to identify with locals while trying to be part of an in-group. After arriving in the host country, immigrants tend to view the positive aspects of the host society's culture and lifestyle.

This phenomenon, according to Albanian scholar Zyhdi Dervishi, can be explained by factors generated from the origin country. According to him this phenomenon can be explained as a reaction to the repressive, extreme ethnocentric practices imposed by the communist regime in Albania. After arriving in Italy, Albanian immigrants almost instinctively switched to positions of xenocentrism, a tendency that lasts from one to the first 7-8 months of the migrant experience (Dervishi, 2003: 207-18). The individualization or 'de-collectivization' of Albanian identities is conventionally viewed as a reaction to the communist past (King & Mai, 2008: 18), which forced people to act, wear, speak and live equally, according to the norms set by the communist system, to lead compulsory collective life, losing the sense of individuality.

On the other hand, Fabio Berti, professor at University of Siena in Italy, in his article "Immigrazione albanese in Italy" (Albanian Immigration in Italy), emphasizes the role of a very important factor generated from the host country, which pushes immigrants to mimesis. According to him, immigrants, under the pressure of public opinion which discriminates and at the same time invites them to assimilate, conceal some parts of their original identity in order to look more like citizens of the host country's culture" (Berti, 2006: 139-40).

In reality, Albanians had cultivated the myth of the "Promised Land" toward Italy way before the fall of the communist regime. Especially teenagers and young adults, had already undergone a process of *anticipatory assimilation* to Italy and its way of life even before their 'migratory projects' came to life. Years of watching Italian television had given most young Albanians a reasonable command of the Italian language (King & Mai, 2008: 7) and culture as well.

SH.R., female 59 years old, who came in Italy on board of the "Butrinti" boat, in his interview states:

> *"At first, Albanians were prejudiced and negatively stigmatized. If you said you were an Albanian, people reacted negatively and avoided all forms of communication. In order to dodge these reactions, I used to speak Italian in public places. The natives assumed I was either Russian or Nordic because of my blue eyes, light skin and blonde hair. It is hard to accept, but sometimes I hid my nationality..."*

Y.Ç., now 72 years old, during his remarks said:

> *"I went to Italy by boat in that massive migration of March 1990 and I stayed in Bari for 9 months. During that time, a negative opinion was spread among the natives, for us, Albanians. I have always hated the generalization of opinion. There are black sheep and white ones everywhere. I remember one day, traveling by train, I found a wallet. There was some money inside, and I never thought of taking it, so I decided to bring the wallet to the Questura of Bari. One day latter, this story became the most important news in the local newspaper "The Albanian who found and returned the wallet..." I wanted the opinion about Albanians to be changed. We were people, just like the Italians, but we had lived in different conditions and this was the only difference between us... I returned to Albania in 1991. Migrating was not for me".*

Studies have shown that prejudicial and discriminatory experiences have a negative impact on an individual's well-being, and at group level, these experiences can be a risk factor for adaptation in the host society (Beiser et al, 1988). As Jelloun mentioned, *change can only be accepted when... at least there are means to hide and make this change invisible* (Romania, 2004: 170). That's why mimesis was a strategy used especially at the beginning of the experience of Albanian people settled in Italy coasts.

According to Vincenzo Romania, the reasons that have made some Albanians mimetizing in Italy, depend on situations, distribution in the territory, extended family and the weak connection between national identity and religious identity (Ibid). Many studies have shown the influence of the religion on the identity formation (Gordon et al, 1967; Verhoeven & Hutsebaut, 1995; Whitley & Kite, 2010). For

Durkheim, religious rites and ceremonies are fundamental to the stability and strengthening of social ties between members of a group and influence the cultivation of a sense of solidarity between them (Durkheim, 1912).

Cultural and religious differences between natives and immigrants have often become a source of conflict in host societies and have hampered the integration process of immigrants in this country (Casanova, 2005) . To avoid this conflict, in cases where the pressure of the local society is very strong and the religious identity of the immigrants is weak, many immigrants have chosen religious conversion as a mimesis strategy and a way of acceptance from the host society.

Because of prohibition of religious practices and the lack of religious institutions during the communist regime, especially from 1967 to 1990, the religion had a weak influence on the identity formation of Albanian people.

According to Devole, the inability to express oneself, the hiding of group identity, the internalization of prejudices about one's own nationality, the old or new complexes of inferiority, the decline of self-esteem, sooner or later, lead to real incompatibility, to the absorption of negative values, to dubious paths of integration... (Devole 2008, 195-200).

I.K., a 62-year-old man shows:

"Yes, at the beginning we were embarrassed to say we were Albanian. We spoke in Italian, more precisely, the Tuscan dialect. Rarely we stayed in groups. We preferred not to be labeled as "those-Albanians" It was very interesting. Not all groups of migrants act like this. Chinese for example are closed in their groups. Or even Albanians of Kosovo act differently from us. Maybe because of their history, cultural and religious factors. Now things have changed a lot. We feel at home and are not embarrassed. We have gotten to know each other and we have overcome this inferiority complex."

6. The Reconstruction of Self-Identity

This part of the paper seeks to explain how the perception of Albanians as *the Other*, has been altered by the natives through time.

Speaking about the reconstructing of the self- identity is a difficult task. In philosophical perspective, the big question on identity is "Who am I?" one possible answer is "Nothing yet, still in progress." If one sees the self not as an inner soul that is in us from birth (or perhaps from conception), but rather as a product of our actions and thoughts, then self-identity is something to be earned, not an already existing fact to be discovered (Solomon & Higgins, 2013: 210).

Sigmund Bauman, a researcher on identity issues in the age of globalization, has argued that identity is "something that needs to be invented rather than discovered". Identity is a kind of "formative game" that each individual tries to create, but while the enigma in this game is solved by the unison of different parts and the final image appears, there is no clarity about identity, because there is no moment when the "final image" emerges and there is no final result that we can adhere to. In the content of identity, Bauman asserts, "experiment with what you have" (2003: 56) and there is no way to know if you own the right parts or if there are missing parts, or how to save those parts, that are potentially valuable. It follows that "belonging" and "identity" are not engraved in stone, are not provided by a "life guarantee", but "are to a large extent negotiable ..." (2003: 6). Citing Hesse, Solomon and Higgins remind us that "each of us is a multitude of selves. We may be different selves in different circumstances. In a striking image, Hesse tells us that 'man is an onion,' with hundreds of different layers (selves)" (See: Solomon & Higgins, 2013: 212).

It is important to mention that after Italy faced the influx of Albanian immigrants, a kind of empathy was evoked towards them, recalling the experience of Italian emigration to more developed countries during the XIX and XX centuries.

Italy was long a sending country of migrants, with at least 25 million Italians emigrating between 1876 and 1973. Foreign immigration to Italy began during the 1970's. An aging and wealthier population has meant that lower skill, hazardous, low wage and low status jobs have been abandoned by Italians

(Chaloff, 2008: 5). Italy became an important destination for people from African and Asian countries and, after 1989, from Eastern European countries too (Mai, 2003: 86). At the beginning of the experience in the host country, the settled people generally do dirty, difficult, (relatively) dangerous and dull (4D) jobs. Comparing the experience of Italian emigrants then, with the Albanian immigrants in the beginning of the 1990's, Stella in his book "L'orda. Quando gli albanesi eravamo noi" (The horde. When we were the Albanians) wrote:

> *"Were we dirty? Sure, but many portraits painted on us were shameful. It was shameful to accuse us to being mafia? Of course, but we cannot deny having imported in the States the mafia and the camorra. The truth is made up of several faces. Shades. Ambiguity. And if we go to reconstruct the other half of our history, we will see that the only real and substantial difference between "us" then and immigrants in Italy today is almost always the detachment of time. We have lived the experience before, them after..." (See: Casalbore, 2010).*

According to Tsagarousianou, migration is not simply a flow of people, but it now 'refers to a constellation of economic, technological, cultural, ideological and communication flows and network' (Tsagarousianou, 2007: 45). So, referring to the Albanians in Italy, the attention mustn't be focused anymore on the crowd of people who came in Italy by ships in the beginning of the nineties, but on the relationship, communication and coexistence between the Albanian immigrants and the natives.

Over time, the coexistence and close familiarity of Albanian immigrants with Italian natives enabled a suppression of prejudices. Albanians, now adapted to the Italian society, have helped natives to think differently about them.

E.N., 41, an Albanian woman who lived in the province of Tuscany, during her storytelling said:

> *"... At the beginning ... they said, 'How come you are Albanian?' Because ... television (influences-B.Z). Yes, at first when they found out that I was Albanian, I saw their reaction and heard them say "It is not possible that you are Albanian!". I used to tell them, and always do, "I'm Albanian because Albanians are like that If you hear unpleasant things about Albanians on the TV, do not assume that everyone is like that." "Over time, the natives have changed their opinion towards us...there is almost no division at all in this area between Italians and Albanians. In this area, most Albanians live with their families and they even bought houses here ... they already enjoy a well-being life...".*

According to Norbert Elias, division and exclusion can be explained in terms of social relationships that are constructed as 'chains of interdependence that link people together' (Elias, 1978: 131). Referring to the study of Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson "Established and outsider" (1994) Ohlsson explains: "The image of the others, the outsiders, with relatively less power, had a tendency to be based on those worse off, whose characters were negatively enhanced. Members of the established partition that fell outside the frame, "black sheep", had a tendency of being expelled or excluded. However, this figuration was not a static situation, but a continuous dynamic process" (Ohlsson, 2003: 4).

Being a dynamic process means that the relations between the established people and the outsiders can be changed through the time. As Elias and Scotson's explained, the stigmatization usually is directed to the newcomers. The established groups tend to stigmatize and exclude the new groups, for the fact that they do not have a history in the host country, regardless of the race and ethnicity to which they belong (Elias & Johnson, 1994).

Referring to the case of Albanians in Italy, especially those who have migrated in the early nineties, as time went by, they started to become "the established" and their position of the outsider has been replaced by the newcomers. During their recalls, people mentioned how prejudices, once directed at Albanians, later turned to Romanians (the newcomers), who filled the streets of Italy especially after 2007, when Romania joined the European Union.

A.P., 66, an Albanian man who was settled at Siena in the beginning of the nineties, recalls:

> *"One positive thing for the Albanian community is that now we are not pinpointed negatively. Especially*

during the '90s, it was normal to find an Albanian on the first page of the newspapers. When Romania became part of the EU, many Romanians came to Italy and started doing things that we used to do, for example, we all gathered at Piazza del Campo in the beginning, but after we stopped doing it. The Romanians did the same, so the attention shifted from us to them."

Researcher Nicola Mai throws up the idea that another interesting factor that should be analyzed is the classic demographic indicator of mixed marriages with locals (Mai, 2011: 7). Mixed marriages between Italians and foreigners have grown significantly over the last decade. In 2005, marriages of Italian citizens with a foreigner accounted for 12.5 percent of all marriages in Italy. This indicator in 1995 was only 4.8 percent (ISTAT, 2007: 5). In 2013, from 1,354 marriages in which at least one spouse is of Albanian nationality, more than half of them concern an Italian husband and an Albanian wife (53.6 per cent) (See: Husha, 2016).

Today, it is difficult to mention statistics about mixed marriages, because many Albanians have been naturalized in Italy, obtaining the Italian citizenship.

M. C., 51, is an Italian woman, married with E.C., an Albanian man. They live in Matera, Bari and have two children. During her interview M. remembered:

"E., came in Italy by boat with his father and I met him in a refugee camp in Bari. I remember very well his innocent face. E., was so polite, a nice person and well educated. It was impossible not to fall in love with him (she smiles). I was aware about "the struggle" I had to undergo with my parents at that time to marry E., because of the opinion about Albanians was very bad in Italy at that time, but I was convinced he was the right one. I have found thousands of common values between me and E., between my family and his family and I'm happy to marry him."

Despite the stigma and prejudice created by the generalization of some cases, especially through the media, Albanians have tried to reconstruct their identity through showing values such as punctuality, keeping the word, loyalty, desire to learn and progress, help others etc. To build a life with dignity, Albanian parents push their children to be enrolled at Italian universities. Albanian scholar Zyhdi Dervishi argues that education is seen by Albanian emigrants as a "mechanism" of integration into the host society, as a kind of "lift" to dignity, and therefore education turns into an expression of cultural value important to them (Dervishi, 2003: 153-54).

Another way of reconstructing the dignity was the approach toward work. The coexistence with natives, thrusted many Albanians to startup businesses in partnership with natives.

According to Werner Sombart immigrants (foreigners) tend to present anti-conformist qualities, critical spirit, entrepreneurial and creative, qualities that are found in social figures excluded in society. Since immigrants have nothing to do with tradition and the symbolic apparatus of the host society, they cultivate the ability to conduct commercial and financial activities. On the other hand, it needs to be taken into account that individuals who decide to emigrate are more active, willing, courageous, cold-minded, less sensitive and with personalities focused on the future. To get out of the situation of need and avoidance, immigrants tend to become entrepreneurs, developing skills that they would not have developed in their homeland (Sombart, 1916).

In many cases they see the collaboration with the natives, as a good way to express their personalities, to be successful, and use this collaboration as an instrument to reconstruct their identity that drives them to be better accepted in the host society.

DH.S., a 50-year-old man from Kavaja (a small city 55 kilometers from Tirana), during his storytelling claimed:

"... I managed a company in collaboration with an Italian citizen. We had separated liabilities. The salary of the employees was my task, the others were of his part...we trusted each-other".

It seems that the prejudiced tendencies of the natives towards the Albanian immigrants were overcome through time and lost their significance when common values and common interests were

identified between these two groups. Being co-owners with natives in entrepreneurial activities is an expression on one hand of a social "openness" of the host society, and, on the other hand, of a very good ability of successful integration of Albanian immigrants into the host country.

As the Albanian scholar Dervishi mentioned in its book "Sociologji Kulture 1. Vështrime të Kryqëzuara në det" (Sociology of culture 1. Crucified views on the sea), the migratory experience leads immigrants, but also locals, to relative cultural attitudes. According to Wong cultural relativism holds that important cultural differences exist (descriptive cultural relativism) and the truth or justifiability is relative to groups i.e. that what is true or justified for one group is not true or justified for another group (epistemological cultural relativism) (Wong, 2009: 91) .

K.S, man, 63 claimed:

"Well, I remember 30 years ago, and comparing to nowadays, I can really say that is completely different. I do not see any barriers and divisions any more. We know each other very well, we know each other's past, problems and traditions as well. Everyone is aware that black and white sheep can be find in each society. The figure of the Albanian is not generalized any more. The one who honestly work is fully respected and occupies an important place in Italian society".

Reflecting on the above-mentioned narration, it is worth to mention, what Howson (2009) has shown, the cultural relativism is associated with a general tolerance and respect for difference, to an understanding of people's values, beliefs and practices.

7.   Conclusions

The formation of "the other", which is shaped by social interaction, directs people's thoughts, perceptions and actions. The analyze of "the other" image construction, explored in the case of Albanians in Italy, pointed out that the image of "the other", as a universal process, is created more quickly under the influence of factors that make the "other" more visible, such as the massive exodus by boats in 1991.

With the aim to deconstruct the image of "the other", the mimesis tendencies at the beginning of the migrant experience have been adopted in Albanian immigrants' case, pushed by the will for a positive social identity.

An Italian quote says 'Tutto il mondo è paese', (The whole world is one country), which best demonstrates that human beings, despite their differences, react similarly in similar circumstances.

The coexistence between "the foreigners" (they) and natives (we) helped rebuilding the perceptions, attitudes, behaviors and identities, even though self-identity is a never-ending process.

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