Transmitting, Re-Telling. Narratives By Female Authors Of The Twentieth Meridian

Transmitir, volver a contar. Narrativas de autoras del vigésimo meridiano

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Abstract: Based on research in Intercultural studies concerning literary production of East-Central European female authors living in Italy, this article proposes an interdisciplinary analysis of a selection of texts in which a secondary narration is present, either as a testimony of funeral rituals in the authors' country of origin or as a representation of a communication form involving women in moments of transition and/or crisis. The author's suggestion is that this stylistic choice is related to a perception of the role of one's own writing, while the act of re-telling acquires a special power in the eyes of the writers. The article also takes into consideration some interviews conducted with these authors, during which there is an exploration of their thoughts on the relationship between narrative and memory.

Keywords: East-Central Europe, memory, female writing, transnational literature, literature and society

Resumen: Basado en una investigación en estudios interculturales sobre la producción literaria de autoras de Europa del Este y Europa Central que viven en Italia, este artículo propone un análisis interdisciplinario de una selección de textos en los que está presente una narración secundaria, ya sea como testimonio de rituales funerarios en el país de origen de las autoras o como representación de una forma de comunicación que involucre a mujeres en momentos de transición y/o crisis. La sugerencia de la articulista es que esta elección estilística está relacionada con una percepción del papel de la propia escritura, mientras que el acto de volver a contar adquiere un poder especial a los ojos de las escritoras. El artículo también toma en consideración algunas entrevistas realizadas a estas autoras, durante las cuales se explora su pensamiento sobre la relación entre narrativa y memoria.

Palabras clave: Centroeuropa, Europa del Este, memoria, escritura femenina, literatura transnacional, literatura y sociedad

Narratives from the Twentieth Meridian: a Foreword

"Mi sono stancata di aspettare e alla fine le ho scritto per prima, queste pagine confuse in cui parlo di lei, di noi, di altri. [...] Le ho scritto nella lingua che parlo con i miei figli, questo basterà" (Ibrahimi, 2008: 261).[1] In these lines, which appear in the conclusion of her debut novel *Rosso come una sposa* [*Red as a bride*], Anilda Ibrahimi (2008), female writer born in Albania and moved to Rome in 1997, reveals to the reader a secret concerning the nature of the writing: that is, that the story begins long before the writing, with a tale passed on orally. In fact, the protagonist inherits from the older women of the family the task of collecting facts involving loved ones to compose a narration, to be devoted to the deceased. It must be said that Ibrahimi's novel is in part autobiographical, and that the "language she speaks with her children", also the language of her literary work, is Italian.[2] The shift from

[1][I got tired of waiting and eventually I wrote to her first, these confused pages, in which I talk about her, about us, about others. [...] I wrote to her in the language I speak with my children, this should be enough]. For all of the texts and interviews cited, all translations are those of the author.

[2]Among migrant writers whose literary works came out in Italy after the 2000's, Anilda Ibrahimi was one of the most commercially successful, having published with Einaudi, first *Rosso come una sposa* followed by *L'amore e gli stracci del tempo* [*Love and the shreds of time*] (2009) and later *Non c'è dolcezza* [*There is no gentleness*] (2012), and being the subject of many critical studies. For her attention to the experience of women in a patriarchal society has been analyzed, among others, by Carla Carotenuto (2014), Silvia Contarini (2013) and Franca Pellegrini (2013). The narration of violence in Ibrahimi's novels, and in those of other female migrant writers, has also been explored by Nora Moll (2013), Anna Belozorovich (2019a). Many critical works regarding Ibrahimi emerged in the context of the Italian postcolonial studies, often in a comparative perspective, such as that by Daniele Comberiati (2012), or the monograph by Emma Bond (2018), which has a strong interdisciplinary accent and puts special attention on the transnational experience of mobility and the body as key concept to interpret this kind of narrative. More recently came out the publication in English language curated by Marie Orton, Graziella Parati and Ron Kubati (2021), which

her mother tongue affects furtherly the function of the story, which not only is translated from its "original" oral form, and its addressee (from an oral discourse symbolically addressed to the dead to a literary work published for an Italian reader), but also from its "native" language to the new one. Thus the "decision"' Ibrahimi describes in the quote above has deep consequences and raises questions connected with the transmission of femininity, a femininity originally characterized by a strongly patriarchal community, in a new context.

Offering a "story within the story", collecting tales within a tale, recurring to a kind of a multi-layered narrator, in ways that could recall a Sheherazade figure, seem to be narrative strategies that appear in several literary works by female migrant writers. Therefore, I would like to connect this mechanism to a wider series of works in which the transference of a previous story, in oral form, interacts with the literary text, showing, almost as a form of rebellion, narrative modes that are different from writing, and linked to femininity. In addition to Ibrahimi's novel, in fact, which covers a large period of time, among the texts quoted here are plots set mainly in the present or recently, in Italy, in the author's country of origin or in neighbouring countries located along the twentieth meridian.

Among these there are novels linked, albeit indirectly, to the war in the Balkans, such as *Lezioni di Selma* [*Selma's Lessons*] (2007) by Sarah Zuhra Lukanić, born in Croatia, and *Katerina e la sua Guerra* [*Katerina and Her War*] (2009) by Barbara Serdakowski, originally from Poland.[3] From their pages emerge the experience of women in times of war, the role of memory in the relationship between generations, and the prospect of successful or unsuccessful overcoming the traumas suffered, in person or by loved ones, when one is led to no longer live in their homeland. Other texts focus on the experience of female protagonists

discusses a wide range of diversity experiences in contemporary narratives and deals with a large corpus of publications by migrant writers in Italy.

[3]The historical background of Lukanić's novel is the siege of Sarajevo, that took place in 1992. The context of Serdakowski's novel is harder to locale, since it contains no indication of dates or physical places (except for Germany, where the protagonist flees as a refugee).

immersed in a specific social and cultural context or faced with the challenges of a new context. These include *Io, noi, le altre. Donne portatrici di cambiamento tra Bosnia Erzegovina, Istria e Italia* [*Me, Us the Others. Women bringers of change between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Istria and Italy*] (2012) by Enisa Bukvić, Bosnian, *Dalla Romania senza amore* [*From Romania Without Love*] (2009) by the Romanian writer and journalist Anca Martinas, finally *Voglio un marito italiano* [*I Want an Italian Husband*] (2006) by Marina Sorina, from Ukraine. There are several differences among these works: for example, Serdakowski's novel is set in an imaginary world which we can only deduce is connected to the Balkan war from character's names or descriptions of events such as bombings and Red Cross action. Bukvić's work, on the contrary, is a collection of testimonies and portraits of women met by the author and of whom she speaks in first person. Martinas' and Sorina's novels are both fictional and have a woman protagonist whose destiny is not by any means similar to the one of the authors but is instead relatable to an "idea", at times stereotypical and at times realistic, of what could be the life of a woman who migrates to Italy from that specific country. Still all these texts, I would suggest, represent a "result" of an experience which is, in all the different cases, the experience of a woman, and all of them rely, though by using different strategies, on voices and memories of other women who participate to the telling in a direct or indirect way, at a point we could imagine Ibrahimi's quote as a suitable closure for them too.[4]

All the above-mentioned works were written by authors who migrated physically and linguistically before starting to compose them. However, ascribing these authors to a specific literary category is not one of the aims of this article. The "biographical data" which I try to

[4]The works selected for the present analysis are significant but not the only that offer similar phenomena. For example, we could recall the novel by the Romanian author Ingrid Beatrice Coman *Per chi crescono le rose* [*Who the roses grow for*] (2010), regarding memories of the Ceausescu regime, or *Piccola guerra perfetta* [*Perfect little war*] (2011) by the Albanian Elvira Dones, set during the NATO bombing in Yugoslavia in 1999. The latter, especially, born out of testimonies collected by the author, offers a strongly feminine perspective and a narration built on the voices of women who share the experience of war and who resist by relying on each other and on their memories of normality.

take into account is, if anything, the origin from an area that is large and difficult to define for which I would like to resort to the use of the image of "the Twentieth Meridian", suggested by Marian Małowist. On the one hand, it highlights the quality of "intermediate lands", a meeting place between "Slavic and non-Slavic, 'Western' and 'Eastern' traditions and mentality", enhancing their fluidity and their "fundamental unity in the diversity of European civilisation" (Marinelli, 2008: 73-75). On the other hand, it is more "neutral" than definitions such as "Central" or "Eastern Europe", etc., forbearing the specific and historically connoted perspective that has from time to time conceptualised previous ones. The "fault line" (Brubaker, 1998: 120) which crosses Europe and which, similarly to a threshold, "relates an interior to an exterior, promotes encounters, feeds interactions" (Moracci, 2013: 13), has a long history of clashes, overlaps, re-conceptualisations that can hardly be summarised here.[5]

On the other hand, it is possible to clarify how this delimitation can be interesting for the purposes of this analysis. I would like to recall three of the possible perspectives that support this delimitation and provide interpretations for the cultural discourses that are generated within it. One is constituted by the approach of postcolonial studies, whose gaze has moved to the "East" and has recognized relevant components for its own analysis (Smola and Uffelmann, 2016: 9-15): the crisis of national identity, historical consciousness and memory (Skórczewski, 2016: 104), confrontation and negotiation with neighbouring cultural forces (Pavlyshyn 2016: 61), a peculiar relationship with the present time and the market (Hausbacher, 2016: 413) are just some of them. All are, perhaps inevitably, linked to the historical fact that in recent times has involved the countries that are located along the twentieth meridian, that is to say the fall of totalitarian regimes, the often-violent transformation of political and economic systems with repercussions on social life that could

[5]For a more extensive elaboration of the peculiarities of the reference area in its historical and cultural components, in the context of the present research, see (Belozorovitch, 2019a: 15-50).

not fail to generate numerous cultural discourses both within national borders (which are also in transformation) and outside of them. The historical memory of the totalitarian experience also involved male and female authors who emigrated from their countries of origin (including to Italy), while their texts have entered and continue to enter into a relationship with this memory (Belozorovitch, 2019b), in ways that deserve to be further explored. A third perspective, although not directly connected to the previous ones but of interest for the reading of some of the texts mentioned here, refers to the possible "connections" (Amselle, 2001) that are manifested on a cultural level and that can be expressed in similar or communicating sensitivities and practices. One example could be the work of De Martino on the forms of mourning in the Euro-Mediterranean area as well as many of the countries located along the twentieth meridian, with significant similarities (De Martino, 2008: 129-130). The reference to these practices made by Ibrahimi and by other female authors from the twentieth meridian is interesting, not so much for the information on them, made available to the reader, but because it impregnates the structure of the story, transferring onto it, I would like to suggest, some of the functions of the practice itself.

Women's Speeches

In what has been said so far, the gender factor has been left out. It is, however, necessary to involve it, because it relates to the types of discourse that will be mentioned here. The authors that have been presented earlier are women, and so are the protagonists of their books. Besides their non-Italian origin, that might be circumscribed on bases exposed above, and their being migrants, resulting in a peculiar social condition, they are interested by the variety of power dynamics that have characterised our societies so far. On one side, this element is fundamental for the present analysis. On the other, it is important to recognize the sometimes-ambiguous use of the category of gender (Emberley, 1993: 38),—as well as of that of the "migrant" (Pojmann, 2010: 6)—useful to frame the studies while risking

generalizations such as the ones these studies aim to deconstruct. In the context of this article, the reference to "women writers" and "migrant writers" is not used as an attempt to distinguish them from "local" or "men writers"; instead, it's seen as an instrument useful to discuss narrative strategies, and transmission of knowledge that are significant in women's experience and, in certain cases, related to their geographical origin.

Among the most temporally and geographically shared is the slow access women have to writing (Cardona, 1981: 69) and a linguistic creativity long associated with oracy (Simmel, 2004: 199). However, the speeches of women and the type of speech reserved to women or is handled by them in the group to which they belong undoubtedly deserve special attention and once again justify the use of this category broadly if we think that in every culture women are "the custodians of collective memory and an important part of the heritage of both public and private memory" (Tagliavini, 2004: 237-238).

In *Red like a bride*, Ibrahimi repeatedly and in many ways highlights the special bond with the collective memory of the numerous female protagonists, who meet and make "chiacchiere da donne, parole che si tramandano di generazione in generazione" (Ibrahimi, 2008: 11).[6] In this novel, built on the concatenation of stories through a sort of "passing of the baton", there is a thread that never stops until the end. Among the protagonists is Meliha, who is in charge of reciting verses at funerals. Singing for the dead is a skill of hers, which not all women possess. But for Meliha comes a point of tiredness due to old age, and the woman turns to her daughter with this important task:

> — Comincio a sentirmi stanca, — dice Meliha. [...] — Ti ho chiamata perché ci sono delle cose che non posso più fare. Non sono più quella di una volta. Mi devi aiutare.

[6][women's gossip, words that are passed down from generation to generation]

> Saba la ascolta in silenzio. Dal tono della madre capisce che si tratta di qualcosa di estremamente importante. Se la madre avesse bisogno di qualcuno per zappare l'orto, raccogliere la frutta, portare acqua dalla fontana, non userebbe queste parole.
>
> — Eh, — fa Meliha indicando il cimitero. — Quelli lì sentiranno anche le piogge che dissetano la terra e il vento sui rami dei cipressi, ma altro ne dubito. [...] In tutti questi anni ogni volta che c'erano delle novità sono scesa a raccontare tutto. Hanno il diritto di sapere e noi il dovere di dire ciò che succede. Così non ci perdiamo. Così un giorno, quando ci rincontreremo tutti, sarà come se ci fossimo lasciati il giorno prima. Così la morte capirà che anche se ha preso quello che riteneva suo, niente mai le apparterrà totalmente. [...] Saba mia, adesso tocca a te (Ibrahimi, 2008: 83).[7]

Meliha passes on to her daughter the role she had carried out until then, but it is not simply a matter of lamenting the death of a loved one or a villager: it is a question of regularly addressing those who live in another dimension to inform them about what happens in the community. Saba, the daughter, starts the next day, despite the pressure she feels by this new role: "Informare i morti su tutte le vicende della famiglia è sempre stato compito di sua madre. Il passaggio la turba. I passaggi di questo genere turbano sempre" (Ibrahimi, 2008: 84).[8] In fact,

[7]["I'm starting to feel tired" says Meliha. [...] "I called you because there are some things I can no longer do. I'm not who I used to be. You have to help me".
Saba listens to her in silence. From her mother's tone she understands that this is something extremely important. If her mother needed someone to till the garden, collect fruit, bring water from the fountain, she wouldn't use these words.
"Huh" says Meliha, pointing to the cemetery. "Those might hear the rains that quench the thirst of the earth and the wind on the branches of cypresses, but I doubt they hear more than that. [...] In all these years, whenever there was news, I went down to tell everything. They have a right to know, and we have the duty to tell what is happening. So that we do not get lost. So, one day, when we all meet again, it will be as if we separated the day before. Thus, death will understand that even if it has taken what it considered its own, nothing will ever totally belong to it. [...] My Saba, now it is your turn".]

È incerta sulla voce all'inizio. [...] Ma via via che prosegue diventa più sicura.

Quello che resterà è il suo cieco dolore,
infilzato nelle frattaglie della terra.
Resterà alla fine la sua sorda ansia,
avvolta in gelide stelle della sera.

Alla fine, Saba si sente bene. Si sente al suo posto. Da quel giorno, fino alla sua morte, sarà lei a dover tenere informati i morti su quello che succede ai vivi (Ibrahimi, 2008: 85).[9]

The woman finds her place in the world through the recitation of those lines and the new role acquired; she will carry on, like her predecessor, until the end of her days. In the second part of the novel, the protagonist and the narrator's voice is Dora, Saba's granddaughter. She grows up under the communist regime and moves to Italy after its collapse. The loss of the bond with her grandmother and the inability to find her grave when she dies are a source of disturbance for her. Her place in the world is challenged not only because of the migration as physical displacement (and the social and cultural shock that it brings), but especially because of the interruption of a chain which played a major role in her identity, and that linked her to the women who preceded her. She, therefore, experiences a crisis both in her relationship with the past and the future, represented by her children and by what she will be able to pass on to them while speaking a new language in a new country. At the same time, the past is located in Albania and is represented by models of femininity

[8][Informing the dead about all the family affairs has always been her mother's job. The transition disturbs her. Transitions of this kind are always disturbing]

[9][She is uncertain about the voice at first. [...] But as it goes on it becomes safer.
What will remain is her blind pain, / skewered in the offal of the earth. / Her dull anxiety will remain in the end, / wrapped in icy evening stars.
In the end, Saba feels good. She feels like she belongs there. From that day until her death, she will have to keep the dead informed about what happens to the living]

that are no longer applicable in the world that attends her: the passage from East to West, though simplified, is concentrated, in the protagonist's experience. The woman, disoriented, is waiting for a contact, a confirmation, a sense of communion with her ancestor, but these do not arrive:

> Forse, ho pensato, non è sbagliato il posto in cui l'aspetto ma è sbagliata la lingua. [...] Forse lei cerca di riconoscermi dalle parole, dalla lingua piena di colori e sfumature che mi ha insegnato, dai nostri strani discorsi che solo noi sapevamo decifrare. Ma la sua lingua, azzurra, verde, gialla, come le stagioni dei suoi campi, quella che vorrebbe sentire da me, non è più la mia. [...]
>
> Con me ho portato tutto ciò che mi è rimasto di lei, senza traduzione (Ibrahimi, 2008: 260).[10]

The narrator, now also the protagonist, describes in fact all the objects that for generations have accompanied the life of women of the family and which are now with her in Italy. These objects are kept inside of a trunk which Dora brought with her: each piece is meaningful, since it is linked to a memory. At this point of the novel, the reader knows the story of each of those objects. Objects do not need translation like words do, and they can be moved. The displaced words, instead, generate a sense of incompleteness in the woman, even guilt for not being able to carry on her grandmother's duty. The novel's conclusion, however, offers an unexpected and illuminating solution, briefly explained by the quote that introduces the present article. The literary text emerges as the possible discourse now that speaking to the dead became impossible after migration. The work of narrating in written

[10][Maybe, I thought, the place where I am waiting is not wrong, but the language is. [...] Maybe she tries to recognise me from the words, from the language full of colours and shades that she taught me, from our strange speeches that only we knew how to decipher. But her language, blue, green, yellow, like the seasons of her fields, the one she would like to hear from me, is no longer mine. [...]
I brought with me all that is left of her, without translation]

form is thus–also–a translation of the previous work of reciting verses in the oral form. "Tired of waiting", the woman chooses to write, thus altering the means traditionally used to perform this function. She also does it in Italian, the language she speaks to her children. For her grandmother

> mi rimane un unico debito: i versi dei suoi lamenti, i versi che viaggiano senza sosta dalla vita alla morte per raccontare come va il mondo senza di noi, dopo di noi. Perché abbiamo il diritto di sapere. Dopotutto una volta siamo stati tutti dalla stessa parte (Ibrahimi, 2008: 261).[11]

In this new transformation, the protagonist now declares herself as the author. And the reader discovers that he/she has been the recipient of a "chant", a participant in that ancient form of communication. The act of writing becomes momentarily, perhaps in an illusory way, visible to the reader.

The unveiling also defines—in a new manner—the position of the writer and reader. The first is located between two worlds, reminding us of the coordinates suggested in Van Gennep's historical study on ritual: the intermediate space must be travelled to the end, because only in this way will it be possible to restore the lost balance (Van Gennep, 1960: 186). The second position, that of the reader, is, unexpectedly, that of the *other* par excellence. "The continuity between ancient and modern, which we return to feel", suggests Scurati, "allows us to glimpse at the anchoring of what we still call 'literature' to the immemorial anthropological origin of humanity: to the deep crust where the living is constituted as such" (Scurati, 2012: 59). The residues of ancient formulas, which we would not expect to notice on the surface of literary texts written over the years we live, allow us to

[11][I have only one debt left: the verses of her complaints, the verses that travel relentlessly from life to death to tell how the world goes without us, after us. Because we have the right to know. After all, we were all on the same side once]

feel this continuity and to strengthen precious bonds. On the background, there is another line which is available for the writer to cross back and forth: that between East and West, which seem to converge on the nature of women's storytelling, as suggested by Caverero (1997). This latter point will be examined furtherly in the next paragraphs.

A Story to Mend History

Ibrahimi's novel is set in the Albanian history of the 20th century, but its perspective is mostly a private one: historical events are important because they affect family life, and they may alter the balance within a small community. Along the story, episodes of violence are sometimes so dense that they appear as an interrupted cycle. Within the group of characters that inhabit the novel, especially through the passages set in a remoter past, 'private' solutions to internal tensions or disagreements are preferred, and are often ultimate, such as death, but other times continuous, such as psychological pressure. What we assist to, therefore, is mostly community violence, which is interpersonal and "unofficial" but takes place in a public space and can be seen and/or known by anyone (see Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, Lonzano, 2002: 5-8).

The pain of an entire family which has suffered loss of loved ones through generations is somehow united by the telling, passing from one female character to another, as it is being processed and, I'd suggest, "tamed". This last term is not used casually but wants to recall the work of Veena Das and her research on the story of women victims of ethnic and community violence, in which she highlights "how they have grasped these harmful signs of violence and have re-appropriated through a work of domestication, ritualisation, and re-narration" (Das, 2005: 215). In the narration of violence shared at a social level, depending on the historical moment and geographical location, it is possible to find the chance of distancing from and "re-elaborate" the event in different ways, leading the event to a didactic,

moral, philosophical, participatory, or aesthetic pleasure dimension (Gili, 2007: 38). The women described by Das feel that they have the task of providing this narrative already in the cultural context in which they live, as it often happens with other formulas such as the manifestation of mourning or the funeral cry. Yet, writes the anthropologist, they autonomously overcome the limits of these formulas, taking this initiative with the specific purpose not only of making the evil done to them known, but above all of "bearing witness to the evil perpetrated against by the entire social fabric, the damage done to the very idea that different groups can inhabit the world together" (Das, 2005: 216), as if discourse had the power to, in fact, *mend*, this fabric. The word therefore manifests itself as a concrete tool for managing a difficult experience, no longer as part of a psychological journey, no longer as a means of reconciling with and reconciling the social universe, no longer as a way of producing a political discourse. It is done to make facilitate a transition. The transition is intended on two levels: that from a starting point to a new condition by the narrator, but also the transition of the narration itself from one person to another and, above all, from one form to another.

"The word lives outside itself" (Bachtin, 1997: 100) and, in order to stay alive and keep alive what it carries, it seems to necessarily have to keep moving. It is therefore in the same "nature of the word that hides the secret of telling" (Sobrero, 2008: 116), and this nature, I would like to emphasize with Adriana Cavarero, has everything to do with "a desire for identity that only the narrated form seems to be able to make tangible" (Cavarero, 1997: 80). Identity, in turn, seems to have a circular relationship with memory, finding its origin in it and being destined for it. Thus, the narration of events is also the construction of a new landscape of personal and historical memory (Kirmayer, 1996: 175), a way of redesigning the environment in which to recognize oneself.

The narrative itself, however, is a phenomenon not without paradoxes: Sobrero highlights the problem of the "claim to stop the procedural and never completed character of

life in a narrative, to want to imitate life" while the narration, if anything, is destined to chase the latter without hope (Sobrero, 2008: 31). It is no coincidence that the type of narration we are talking about here is a narration that by its nature arises in response to life, to specific conditions of life. Movement is part of its nature and is born even before the word. It is the "instinct to tell": "this obsession and torment of the brain to order facts into stories" (Sobrero, 2008: 41).

The works of the authors mentioned in the introduction offer several examples of how different perspectives converge into one text, and how different experiences are organized in order to participate in one narration. All these works depict portraits of women whose past can be used as a tool for a reflection or a more accurate reading of a historical moment or of a social phenomenon. The novel *I Want an Italian Husband* by Marina Sorina contains a short story offered to the protagonist by an unknown woman during an airplane flight. It is a casual encounter with a character destined to disappear from the plot: Oksana's is a spontaneous, uninterrupted monologue which collects the most important facts of the young woman's life and her experience in Italy. It is a bitter tale, made up of disappointments (Sorina, 2006: 222-224). The girl falls in love with a married man who exploits her. Without realising it, she finds herself working as a prostitute. Once she has acquired a deeper awareness, hardened by that experience and the impossibility of choice, she uses what she has learned to make use of men in return, and finally builds a position for herself:

> Adesso sono sistemata, mi sono rifatta una vita, [...] posso camminare a testa alta e per ora mi va bene lo status della donna sposata; ancora qualche anno e potrò fare domanda per la cittadinanza italiana. Poi si vedrà. Hai capito amica mia? Questi sono gli italiani e questa è l'Italia! (Sorina, 2006: 224),[12]

[12]["Now I am settled, I have rebuilt my life, [...] I can walk with my head held high and for now I am fine with the status of married woman; a few more years and I will be able to apply for Italian citizenship. Then we will see. Do you understand, my friend? These are the Italians, and this is Italy!"]

she explains to her traveling companion. The protagonist does not answer but learns a lesson: "il suo racconto andava a riempire un altro tassello mancante" (Sorina, 2006: 224).[13] The piece is given by the possibility of comparing oneself, reflecting on one's own path, though different from that of the traveling companion, giving it a meaning. The two stories, that of the protagonist and that of the passing woman, communicate without confronting each other: the comparison is available to the reader, and the possibility of joining the pieces through the combination of different paths is revealed in all its potential in the eyes of those who read.

A much more intense interaction is the one we witness throughout Anca Martinas' entire novel, *From Romania Without Love* (2009). In this case, the protagonist, Lia, is also the one who welcomes the story around which the novel is built, the one of Daria. Curiously, they are once again traveling companions. But in this case, and this can be significant, the journey is a long bus ride from Romania to Rome. In that journey the destiny of both women is decided and their telling to each other acts as a real means to "tame" the passage from one point to another, experienced as a critical moment of existence. The dialogue between the two women is occasionally interrupted by the details of this passage: moments of tension for papers, moments of uncertainty, voices of other passengers who in turn tell each other or share impressions. Lia and Daria tell their whole life, starting from Romania, where they met once by chance, and from the places that both had frequented, up to their different and difficult destinies as Romanian migrants in Italy. Stories that were only told so far will find their conclusion at the end of the journey. What had not yet happened at the time of their meeting, happens after their arrival. The feeling—reinforced by the narration style—is that the conclusion was already written, that at the time of the conversation and of "ordering facts into stories" an ending is being constructed accordingly. The two women,

[13][her story was going to fill another missing piece]

writes Martinas, “hanno seminato lungo il viaggio frammenti delle loro esistenze, come se avessero voluto lasciare delle tracce per ritrovare poi la strada del ritorno” (Martinas, 2009: 180).[14] The journey and the narrative therefore appear to be deeply linked and the word acts as a guide to move between apparently incommunicable dimensions.

Another case is the book *Me, us, the others* by Enisa Bukvić, in which the author mixes her own story with that of a large number of women met on her journey, “donne con un’esperienza forte” (Bukvić, 2012: 17)[15], as Bukvić herself defines them in the prologue. Among the aspects that most interested her during the preparation of the volume, the author observes: “Ho dato particolare rilievo all’analisi degli eventi e delle sensazioni che ci spingono verso un cambiamento da cui trarre giovamento, chiedendomi se si tratta più di forze inconsce o consce” (2012: 18).[16] Among the female figures described, many are from Bosnia: for example, Fata, “bosniaca orgogliosa della sua origine, però anche consapevole del suo arricchimento culturale avvenuto attraverso l'influenza della convivenza con gli italiani” (Bukvić, 2012: 59),[17] or Slavica, who “è stata tre anni nella Sarajevo assediata. Spesso parla di quest’esperienza difficile e indimenticabile. Molto corretta nel suo racconto della guerra, è una vera bosniaca” (Bukvić, 2012: 62).[18] Nataša, comes from Croatia and with her the author shares a peculiar sense of common identity, given by the fact that both have lost their (same) country of origin, now located only in the past: “Quando ci siamo conosciute, eravamo jugoslave” (Bukvić, 2012: 55).[19] Even more interesting is the portrait of Maria Theresa, who

[14][they sowed fragments of their lives along the journey, as if they wanted to leave traces in order to find their way back]

[15][women with a strong experience]

[16][I have given particular emphasis to the analysis of the events and to the sensations that push us towards a change that can be beneficial, asking myself if it is more about unconscious or conscious forces]

[17][proud Bosnian, but also aware of her cultural enrichment through the influence of coexistence with Italians]

[18][spent three years in besieged Sarajevo. She often talks about this difficult and unforgettable experience. Very correct in her account of the war, she is a true Bosnian]

[19][When we met, we were Yugoslavs]

comes from Rwanda and who arouses a sense of closeness in the narrator: "mi sono resa conto che ogni rwandese porta tanta rabbia dentro di sé, come il mio popolo in Bosnia Erzegovina. Forse è proprio il dolore che mi lega così tanto a Maria Teresa" (Bukvić, 2012: 123).[20] The reference is to the Rwandan genocide, which took place in 1994, and which reminds to the writer the ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian war, in a larger period of time that coincided partially with the slaughter of the Tutsis. In both episodes, women were notoriously victims of rape, used as a weapon against entire populations.

According to the author, some "elementi [...] uniscono tutte queste donne. Sono tutte aperte, intelligenti, capaci, creative, colte e umane" (Bukvić, 2012: 75).[21] About Bosnians she states that

> Non si scordano la guerra in Bosnia Erzegovina e di tutto quel male che la popolazione, indifesa, ha subito. Alcune hanno perso i cari, altre hanno vissuto dei momenti duri e difficili. Portano questo dolore sempre con loro cercando di superarlo. Forse anche per questo motivo sono tanto attive. Hanno una forza interiore particolare e non si arrendono mai. Una delle caratteristiche più rilevanti che riguarda queste donne è che sono grandi portatrici di cambiamento positivo sia in Italia sia in Bosnia Erzegovina (Bukvić, 2012: 76).[22]

This round up of portraits ends with a reflection on the reason for collecting so many stories of different women in a single volume. The author's explanation emphasizes the importance of telling one's own experience not only for the benefit of a single person but for

[20][I realised that every Rwandan carries so much anger within her, like my people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Maybe it's the pain that binds me so much to Maria Teresa]

[21][elements [...] unite all these women. They are all open, intelligent, capable, creative, cultured and human]

[22][They do not forget the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and all the evil suffered by the defenceless population. Some have lost loved ones; others have experienced hard and difficult times. They always carry this pain with them, trying to overcome it. Perhaps this is one of the reasons of their dynamism. They have a particular inner strength, and they never give up. One of the most relevant characteristics concerning these women is that they are great bearers of positive change both in Italy and in Bosnia and Herzegovina]

the benefit of the whole society: negative feelings of victimhood and anger, present in those who have experienced war or injustices, she explains,

> ci bloccano nella crescita sia personale che collettiva e devono essere tirati fuori, diversamente rischiamo di trasmetterli alle nuove generazioni. *Il dolore così farà nascere le prossime guerre.*

> Le donne possono contribuire molto al cambiamento tirando fuori ed elaborando il proprio dolore, diminuendo così la trasmissione del dolore ai figli. Lo devono fare, altrimenti il dolore aumenterà sempre più e può portare l'essere umano all'autodistruzione (Bukvić, 2012: 130-131. Italics mine).[23]

The power and responsibility that the author confers on the female story seem to move well beyond the reader's use of a literary text and the aesthetic pleasure they can draw from it. The clear division of "gender roles" that Bukvić proposes is argued with the idea that, while women narrate, men seem to want to "risolvere tutto con la forza" (Bukvić, 2012: 133).[24] The ability to produce a story is, in the image suggested by Bukvić, not a simple elaboration of one's pain in order to regain psychic balance following traumatic experiences: it is a tool to rebalance society and above all to safeguard the next generations.

[23][block us in both personal and collective growth, and must be taken out, otherwise we risk passing them on to new generations. *Thus, the pain will give birth to new wars.*
Women can contribute a lot to change by bringing out and processing their pain, thereby decreasing the transmission of pain to their children. They must do it, otherwise the pain will increase more and more and can lead the person to self-destruct]

[24][solve everything by force]

Observations such as Bukvić's, which are part of the body of the work and at the same time want to declare what this work *is*, represented a strong motivation to extend the information available on *what the works are* for those who produce them. To this end, the authors cited here were interviewed in 2015 in the context of a broader research. Among the most important topics of discussion, conducted in Italian language in the form of discursive interview, were the identity of the writers, their relationship with literature or other arts, their perception of the Italian literary panorama and especially of the spaces reserved to writers of non-Italian origin, and the use of native/second language(s). The research had a special focus on women's writing and violence, and it converged into an extensive work that analysed these subjects from different points of view (see Belozorovitch, 2019a).[25] The reflections that emerged on the part of the authors in connection to the explored theme have often regarded the mechanisms of memory and, sometimes, brought hypotheses on how literary processing can interact with it. Regardless of the autobiographical intent, and the accuracy of execution of a similar intent, the interviewed authors highlighted the different ways in which memory could participate in the texts and what the text could, in their opinion, accomplish in response to memory.

The novel *Katerina e la sua guerra* [*Katerina and her war*] by Barbara Serdakowski (2009), for example, is the story of a mother who survived the Balkan war and who leaves her daughter totally in the dark about her experiences, despite the fact that her new-born daughter herself was an unwitting witness. The cost of this silence is the sense of frustration felt by the girl, who considers her mother an inaccessible, unnecessarily suspicious woman. Although this is not an autobiographical fact, Serdakowski admits that a similar attitude was taken by her own parents, who had left Poland when she was still a child never to return.

[25]In the reference monograph, the contents of the interviews as well as the manner in which they were conducted are furtherly illustrated on pp. 7-13 and related notes.

Serdakowski in fact shares the painful feeling of standing in front of a "wall" caused by the silence of her parents, who were witnesses of the atrocities of war. The writer herself feels that she has internalized this distressing limit so much that she has never returned home (Serdakowski, personal communication, April 26, 2015).

The mechanism recognized and described by the author can be read in light of the concept of "radioactivity" developed by Yolanda Gampel (Gampel, 2000: 58-59), which refers to the memory of traumatic experience that can flow in the form of absence of words as "intergenerational transmission of terror and violence" that "passes between bodies and is reproduced through 'embedded' memories" (Beneduce, 2010: 38). Unlike survivors, their children have no first-hand memories and cannot mourn. Thus, the experience of parents, together with their suffering is deposited in the mind through this non-verbal transmission, deprived of speech (Gampel, 2000: 61).

And while Serdakowski's novel denounces, in the course of the plot, the risks of silence, in the book by Enisa Bukvić mentioned above, the story seems to be consciously destined to resist and oppose this mechanism. And again, a role that borders on the sacred seems to be attributed to specifically female narration, while the dialogue between women, capable of soliciting the narration among themselves, acquiring it and continuing to transmit it, is an action that ends up connecting the entire humanity.

Instead, the story behind the novel *Le lezione di Selma* [*Selma's Lessons*] by Sarah Zuhra Lukanić (2007) is invisible, but it is outlined through accurate detail, the delicate and often unpredictable precision that characterizes the narrative style. The novel sounds almost like a secret, that of a woman who, in the midst of war and horror, lives a love that no one could have expected. The house of a wealthy Bosnian woman of Jewish religion is occupied by Serbian soldiers who take her husband hostage while they live in rooms of the house for months. The woman has a love affair, initially made of understanding and tension, with Marko, a Serbian captain, who returns the woman's feelings while being responsible for the

suffering of her husband imprisoned in the basement of the same house. At the end of the war, the man is freed, and the family is faced with the difficult reparation of a possible future marked by this experience. However, what deserves attention in this precise context is another tale, the tale of how the story was apprehended:

> mia madre era presidente di Mezzaluna Rossa [e] la nostra casa era sempre piena [di profughi]. [...] Durante la guerra venivano queste persone, che avevano [lì] un punto d'appoggio per magari dopo andare in Europa, [o] altre parti. Spesso erano bambini, accompagnati dalle zie, oppure qualche persona pure ferita, oppure tanti intellettuali che pensavano che scappando... insomma, di tutto e di più. [...]
>
> E in [uno di] questi viaggi viene una signora, da Sarajevo, e racconta *Le lezioni di Selma*. Quella storia (Lukanić, personal communication, July 16, 2015).[26]

What the author finds surprising is that while most of the guests told stories of despair and pain ("sai, tu vedi tanti bambini, con occhioni"[27]), the 'real' Selma, "bevendo caffè", confides a story of forbidden love that "sembrava proprio [...] fuori programma" (Lukanić, personal communication, July 16, 2015).[28] The reality of the facts, explains Lukanić, was even more intricate than the solution found to complete the novel. But what is important to show here is that the book was born from that long outburst between women, just like in the description of the female story given by Adriana Cavarero that does not necessarily

[26][my mother was president of Red Crescent [and] our house was always full [of refugees]. [...] During the war people were coming over, people who had [there] a foothold to maybe later go to Europe, [or] other places. Often, they were children, accompanied by aunts, or some people who were even injured, or many intellectuals who thought about running away ... in short, every kind. [...]
And in [one of] these trips a lady comes from Sarajevo and tells Selma's Lessons. That story]

[27][you know, you see so many children, with these big eyes]

[28][while drinking coffee (confides a story of forbidden love that) simply seemed [...] out of place]

> aspire to immortalise itself in the literary empyrean [...] but rather [...] hangs in the corners of kitchens, in front of a coffee, or on a train, when even those who don't want to hear it are forced to listen to it. In kitchens, on trains, in corridors of schools and hospitals, in front of a pizza or a glass, it is mainly women who tell life stories. [...] Ancient or modern, their art is inspired by a wise repugnance for the universal abstract and follows from a daily practice where the story is existence, relationship, and attention (Cavarero, 1997: 73).

There is therefore, in the choreography of the female story, also the female listener who makes that story possible. In this "tale of the tale" that Sarah Zuhra Lukanić offers during the interview, there is not only a narrator and the events she brings with her, but the presence of more female characters and a very precise setting in which the narration takes place almost as if it were a session with a purpose and a meaning recognized by all those who are present.

Patricia Sawin, in problematising the use of the "woman" category in studies, observes that, in case of narrative modes, this is definable surely by starting from a cultural training (Sawin, 1995: 244). In opposition with regards to claims of the post-structuralist feminist perspective, namely that each individual has a multiple and continuously reconstituted identity based on context and interlocutor, Sawin recalls that some studies show that women construct distinct forms of personal narrative, that is, they create forms of narrative that follow several rules (Sawin, 1995: 241). For example, due to this cultural training, the female narrative predisposes itself by nature to be interrupted. Thus, Sawin observes, women develop a tendency to create stories that seek to help others resolve conflicts, and over time learn storytelling modes that take the form of an "example" or that seek points of contact with other people's narratives. Finally, women narratives can be non-linear, circular, offering a new and different insight into the same situation each time (Sawin, 1995: 243-245). Perhaps also from this point of view it is possible to understand the sense of care attributed by Cavarero to the female act of telling a story of existence (Cavarero, 1997: 73).

According to Anilda Ibrahimi, women have a particular ability of retaining memory through the story. As already done by Bukvić's opposition of feminine narrative to the use of masculine force, Ibrahimi's point of view also states while

> gli uomini andavano in guerra, dovevano combattere, [le donne] rimanevano a casa. Però rimanendo a casa, mandavano avanti la vita [mettendo] al mondo dei figli, che crescevano senza padri. [...] E nel frattempo erano pure attente a trasmettere la cultura, le ninnenanne, la lingua, i canti, la narrazione, l'oralità di una cultura che non è mai andata persa (Ibrahimi, personal communication, September 22, 2015).[29]

In her personal childhood experience in Albania, the presence of older women played a very important role: in the absence of a confidential relationship with her parents and an explicit sexual education

> questa educazione era affidata a questi racconti, erano queste donne della famiglia che nelle feste o durante le serate d'inverno, quando andavi in visita dalla vecchia zia o tutte queste situazioni al femminile, le donne che si raggruppavano in una stanza senza la presenza degli uomini e si raccontavano queste storie (Ibrahimi, personal communication, September 22, 2015),[30]

which served as teachings and examples. So, again, Ibrahimi's referring to a strongly patriarchal society in which nonetheless she learned how to be an adult from women

[29][the men went to war, and had to fight, [the women] stayed at home. But by staying at home, they carried on with their lives, bringing up children who grew up without fathers. [...] And in the meantime, they were also careful to transmit the culture: lullabies, language, songs, narration, oracy of a culture that has never been lost].

[30][this education was entrusted to stories by these women of the family at parties or evenings in winter, when you went to visit an old aunt or in these women populated scenarios, women who gathered in a room without men present told each other these stories]

examples only. In this scenario, men seem to inhabit a parallel world and their practices of continuity, as much as their solutions to crisis, never cross.

Cavarero again recalls a figure of narrator par excellence, Scheherazade, who in addition to acting as a "significant link between an East and a West that agree on the female matrix of the story", confirms the whole tradition of "old witches or wise nurses, grandmothers or storks, fairies or sibyls" which come from the ancient world (Cavarero, 1997: 158). What Cavarero identifies as an important point and which connects us to what Bukvić argued, is that, by telling, Scheherazade risks her own life to save other virgins while waiting to meet the sultan; she "therefore lives to tell and so that others live" (Cavarero, 1997: 158). Thus, the story once again manifests itself as an instrument to stay alive and make the life of others possible.

In arguing the possibility of "an older and more solid link" between literature and anthropology, Sobrero observes "how among people who are far and different from one another, it is possible to find such similar stories [...] certain themes and motifs span centuries and millennia, cultures, and different psychologies, easily passed from noble to vulgar layers of literature and vice versa" (Sobrero, 2008: 34). But, beyond the content and the structure of the stories told, I would like to suggest that the choice itself of transmitting and re-telling may represent an ongoing mechanism which affirms the possibility of being a community beyond geographical, historical, and cultural borders. The women authors of the texts explored above seem to strongly share this idea and recognise a particularly important power in this specific narrative choice.

For a Conclusion

Before concluding, I would like to return to some points presented at the beginning. I wanted to touch base on the fact that the so-called "origin" of the authors from an area both

extensive and difficult to define, of which I have tried to give some indication, could be supported by different types of analysis. Social transformation, state violence, the memory of recent wars or even simply a certain way of conceiving family life, objective or not, are thematised in different ways in many of the texts cited. The presence of these themes in these works interacts with and undergoes the market system: of these phenomena we can recall the refined analyses of Brennan (1997) and above all Huggan (2001), whose concepts of "strategic exoticism" and "staged marginality" often prove to be of enormous utility in preventing a univocal reading of literary phenomena that rest in part on the specific origin of the authors. The question we could ask ourselves is whether the narrative modalities can undergo as much pressure and configure themselves as what Huggan defines as something "exotic", a part of the palatability of the works. The answer, however, presupposes a further study different from the purpose of this article. The question that is interesting, and which perhaps partly recalls the critical points highlighted by Huggan, refers in broader terms to the role that today's writers believe they play between personal and collective history (Said, 2005). And this is, of course, a question that must remain present and open in every place where we intend to discuss the meaning of writing.

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