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Résumé de l'article

This paper will explore how the quest for the mother (whether the missing one of Gunn's novel or the living one of Melfi's memoir) leads the protagonists of both books to rediscover their mother tongue, that is a language based on communication and community building (Parmod, 2008), or as Kate defines it in *Tracing Iris*, a body language. It is through this language that both characters are able to challenge the patriarchal concept of motherhood and, in particular, the stereotype of the good versus the bad mother. The quest for the mother in both texts can be defined as a journey through the protagonists' past that leads them also to problematize the notion of motherland. Significantly, both texts emphasize the idea of resurrection (the resurrection of the self) and their structures seem to mirror the trajectory identified by Podnieks and O'Reilly (2010) as representing the transition from daughter-centric to matrifocal narratives. Such narratives are effective tools in unmasking motherhood not only because they enable mothers to have a voice but also because they represent a different kind of mothering, the mothering of writing (Nayar 2008, p. 140). According to Nayar, textual mothering, by giving birth to stories and narratives, allows motherhood to be reinterpreted as a situation of power and identity (Nayar 2008, p. 140).

Unmasking Motherhood: Journeys of Self-Discovery in Mary Melfi's *Italy Revisited: Conversations with My Mother* and Genni Gunn's *Tracing Iris*

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Abstract: This paper will explore how the quest for the mother (whether the missing one of Gunn's novel or the living one of Melfi's memoir) leads the protagonists of both books to rediscover their mother tongue, that is a language based on communication and community building (Parmod, 2008), or as Kate defines it in *Tracing Iris*, a body language. It is through this language that both characters are able to challenge the patriarchal concept of motherhood and, in particular, the stereotype of the good versus the bad mother. The quest for the mother in both texts can be defined as a journey through the protagonists' past that leads them also to problematize the notion of motherland. Significantly, both texts emphasize the idea of resurrection (the resurrection of the self) and their structures seem to mirror the trajectory identified by Podnieks and O'Reilly (2010) as representing the transition from daughter-centric to matrifocal narratives. Such narratives are effective tools in unmasking motherhood not only because they enable mothers to have a voice but also because they represent a different kind of mothering, the mothering of writing (Nayar 2008, p. 140). According to Nayar, textual mothering, by giving birth to stories and narratives, allows motherhood to be reinterpreted as a situation of power and identity (Nayar 2008, p. 140).

Keywords: motherhood, mothering, mother tongue, motherland, matrifocal narratives

The last ten years or so have been characterised by a renewed interest in the concept of motherhood and mothering. In the United Kingdom alone, the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded two networks, one on the stereotype of "La mamma italiana" led by Dr Penny Morris of Glasgow University and one on Motherhood in Post-1968 European Literature led by Dr Giorgio and Prof Gill Rye at the Centre for the Study of Women's Writing in London. As a result, various interdisciplinary workshops and publications were devoted to this theme. Also, *ITALIAN CANADIANA*, Vol. XXXIV, (2020), 49-56

Italy has not been immune to this trend. The publication of *Le mani della madre* by the Lacanian psychologist Massimo Recalcati, for instance, encouraged a re-evaluation of the role of the mother in the Western world. Paradoxically, in our Western societies heavily influenced by Christian traditions, although motherhood is still frequently “equated with the meaning of life for women [...] it is assigned a subordinate position in relation to the Heavenly Father as well as in relation to earthly fathers” (Grenholm xvii). What all the aforementioned studies and initiatives highlight is that our concept of motherhood is a patriarchal one and the need to embrace alternative notions of motherhood that do not imply the subordination of women. As noted by Nayar, motherhood must be “reinterpreted as a situation of power and identity” (2008, 140) and a form of creativity. In other words, Nayar continues, “a new kind of mothering is required, the mothering (that is the production) of writing” and gives birth to narratives and stories (140). Mother/daughter relationships are usually very important in such narratives. However, according to Podnieks and O’Reilly (2010), most mother-daughter stories are daughter-centric, and since children’s fantasies about their mothers coincide with the patriarchal notion of the self-effacing being, always ready to comfort and put her child first, they do not necessarily promote a progressive idea of motherhood. Melfi’s *Italy Revisited* and Gunn’s *Tracing Iris*, instead, are truly “maternal texts” (to use Podnieks and O’Reilly’s metaphor) as they challenge the traditional stereotype of the good versus bad mother that keeps women trapped in a position of inferiority. Both texts represent a daughter’s quest for her mother; in both cases, the quest is a journey of self-discovery that mirrors the trajectory identified by Podnieks and O’Reilly (2010) as representing the transition from daughter-centric to matrifocal narratives. In both cases, the quest for the mother leads the two protagonists to problematise the notions of motherland/home and mother tongue. The title of Melfi’s memoir is very significant in this sense as it suggests a clear link between mother, motherland and language. The fact that the book is written as a dialogue with the mother and the frequent (even if inaccurate) references to matriarchy as a model society “organized without domination” (Tazi-Preve 73) symbolize the will to establish a mother-daughter relationship based on mutual recognition and shared experience, and to contribute to anti-authoritarian discourses that, as Tazi-Preve points out, “assume the self-determination and independence of women” (73). Despite her prejudices, preconceived ideas and tendency towards abstraction, the narrator of Melfi’s book is determined to produce an accurate reconstruction of her mother’s life, as demonstrated by the use of the tape recorder. Reconstructing her

mother's stories means reconstructing the story of her migration from Italy to Canada and in so doing dispelling the rose-tinted and romanticized vision of Italy the narrator had constructed in her head through books and common stereotypes. By talking to her mother, the narrator is quickly educated on the poverty and harshness of life in Italy, particularly for women who often worked alongside the men in the fields, as only the old or sick could afford to stay at home (27). Contrary to Mary's expectations, no smell of fresh bread welcomed the men when they returned home as "bread was baked in a communal oven. And so was pizza, biscotti and the festive cakes" (27). In a similar vein, Mary is forced to accept that the so-called "healthy" Italian diet consisting of pasta, fruit and vegetables was not a lifestyle choice. It was simply dictated by poverty (35). And despite the trauma of displacement, the need to adapt to a new world and learn a new language, for many women like Mary's mother, migration was a positive experience:

My life started in l'America. I got my bearings here. I like this country, no one ever said a derogatory word against me because I was Italian. Everyone loves our food. If you had opened an Italian restaurant you would be rich and happy. (35)

Although initially, Mary finds her mother's obsession with food almost embarrassing and is reluctant to engage with this aspect of her mother's life in her *Little Big Book of Memories*, the situation changes towards the end of the book. She finally accepts that "recipes are useful and fun" (326) and that there is a lot more to food than just its nourishing function: "books offer information, but recipes handed from one generation to another, bring a certain guarantee (if your mom could do them, so can you)" (332). What is more, the book's concluding paragraph is entirely devoted to the kitchen as a place where miracles take place and there are no family secrets:

You can seek solace in a church or in a man's embrace, but when you are in the kitchen your search stops. You don't need special attention. It has been given to you – your survival assured, your body reaffirmed, reappraised, you can relax and seize the day. What a delight! (332).

Significantly, the last chapter is entitled "Biscotti." This humble sweet represents a true celebration of the narrator's mother's life because, as Mary's mother explains, when she was little "i biscotti were rare treats as were le ostie and i taralli con sale. Here we have them with our coffee as often as we like" (326). The choice of the Italian term 'biscotti' instead of biscuits is also significant because as Mary argues "one's mother tongue adds colour and texture; it enhances flavour and spice. Change the vocabulary of the food you eat, and you change its nature" (33).

Unfortunately, unlike Melfi's mother, Iris, the mother of Gunn's novel, is missing. Gunn uses the quest for an absent mother as a tool to highlight the invisibility of mothers in patriarchal discourses and societies. As Podnieks and O'Reilly remind us:

not only has the mother been lost to the broader traditions of literary history that have privileged narratives by and about male figures, but also, she has been lost within the daughter-centric literatures that do depict the mother: she is absent to her children (almost always daughters) and to herself in that her own voice is silent, her subjectivity lacking or erased. (12)

Iris is a prime example of this lack of subjectivity: "she did what most people did, but lacked heart, spirit" (250). Her inability to conform to society's expectations had often been read as a sign of her fragility, both physical and mental, to the point that she was even sent to a psychiatric hospital (249). Absence, Podnieks and O'Reilly argue, can also be interpreted in terms of abuse. Significantly, all the female characters in Gunn's novel (Iris, Kate, Angie, Patti, Betsy) suffered some kind of abuse either during childhood or adolescence that impacted with various degrees of intensity on their psychological development, trapping them in a negative self-image and often leading to the perpetuation of the logic of violence of which they had initially been the victims. Iris, for instance, had been sexually abused by a family friend but, when she told her parents what happened, nobody believed her: her mother called her a liar and her father a slut (70). In a world where female sexuality and desire are still perceived as problematic, women, as Gunn's characters demonstrate, often end up getting pregnant in their teens and being pressured into having an abortion as "in order to be 'safe' [...] they must resign themselves to assimilation within and maintenance of the traditional social order" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010, 14). Kate, the protagonist of Gunn's novel, considers the motherless daughter image, so popular in classical fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Rapunzel*, *Cinderella* or *Anne of Green Gables*, to mention just a few, as an example of the patriarchal discourse aimed at silencing women. By normalizing the mother's absence, such stories perpetuate the myth of the bad mother as irresponsible, selfish and inconsiderate (133) who, in some cases, feels no remorse in abandoning her children. What is more, the absent mother is usually replaced by an evil stepmother who confirms and reinforces the original negative image. As Kate points out, "the problem with fairy tales [...] is that mothers often abandon daughters" and that "fathers often banish daughters" (13). The terms "abandon"

and “banish” are very significant here, and it is worth focusing for a moment on their definitions. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the verb to abandon means to “cease to support or look after; to desert.” As a result, we could argue, the blame goes with the deserter. What is more, if we consider the noun, “abandon” means lack of inhibition or restraint. Significantly, many of the stories about Iris that Kate is told depict her precisely in such terms. Iris had casual sex with various men; she drank excessively bringing home one of her lovers, despite the presence of her daughter in the house.

The verb “to banish,” on the other hand, means to send someone away (often from one’s country) as a form of punishment and with no possibility to come back; the second meaning is to get rid of something unwanted. In this case the blame is obviously with the person banished, and the term reinforces the idea of the father as he who is in charge of the law. It is no coincidence, I would argue, that Joe (Kate’s father) is a police officer. As the custodian of the Law with the capital “L,” to be understood not just in administrative but also in moral terms, Joe banished Kate when she got pregnant at the age of 15 and sent her to live with her auntie Rose in Vancouver (40). He also lied to Kate about Iris’s disappearance. When Iris’s lover, Dan, shot Iris in a moment of madness as she refused to leave home and go and live with him, Joe killed Dan, allegedly in self-defence. However, instead of telling Kate that Iris had died, he preferred to let her believe that she had abandoned them without leaving a contact address. He went as far as writing fake letters from Iris to Kate, which instead of having the desired effect of pacifying his daughter, made her feel responsible for her mother’s departure. Kate’s determination to “trace” Iris, her refusal to believe that Iris did not care, and her mistrust of the second-hand memories of her mum that her father and those around him had supplied her with, will eventually lead to the truth about Iris’s disappearance being uncovered. This process also enables Kate to unmask the patriarchal discourse aimed at silencing women, and particularly mothers. Kate’s quest for her mother is a strenuous journey that forces her to revisit her past, to question notions of love, friendship, motherhood and fatherhood. As in Melfi’s memoir, the recognition of the importance of the maternal legacy is an essential step in Kate’s journey. Having spent her adolescence feeling ashamed of her mother, trying to reinvent herself as “a woman who needed no one” by acting as a role model at school, and making herself “unleavable” (147), towards the end of the book Kate finally realizes that no matter what she did, one thing would never change. She would

forever be “then, now, always, her mother’s daughter” (242). Through this epiphany, Kate can also discover the true meaning of mother tongue, not as a monolithic language, but as the language of the body and of emotions. As Recalcati explains when discussing the title of his book, *Le mani della madre*, the first form of communication that takes place between mother and child is a non-verbal one, and the mother’s hands epitomize this kind of communication (22-23). Interestingly, the moment Kate recognises the importance of the mother-tongue, she starts taking responsibility for her actions and displays greater respect for her body. Instead of yielding to the temptation of having sex with Matt, her childhood sweetheart and father of the baby she never gave birth to, as a way of temporarily forgetting the trauma of Patti’s murder, Kate rejects his forceful advances and slaps him on his face. This gesture is significant because it shows not only Kate’s determination to be respected as an individual but also her wish to protect Matt’s wife and children from unnecessary suffering. Ultimately, Kate’s gesture displays agency, proving that women can be independent and are not always willing to be silenced. Kate is also able to face up to her mistakes as demonstrated by the episode in which she tells her former husband Ray the story of the “black kitten with yellow eyes and white booties [...] barely weaned and almost blind” (246) and how she let it die of neglect:

One Friday night she was out with a girlfriend when they decided on a whim to drive to Seattle to see a band. One thing led to another, Seattle became San Francisco. When she got back a week later, the kitten was dead on her pillow (246)

Although Kate regrets many things in her life and feels guilty about her mistakes, she is aware of the detrimental effect on women’s sense of identity and subjectivity of the patriarchal tendency to place them either on a pedestal or to depict them as evil. According to Kate, women, like all human beings, are capable of deviant behaviour but this does not necessarily turn them into monsters. However, the idealization of women is as problematic as their demonization: “forcing women onto pedestals was as dangerous and oppressive as forcing them down into servitude and silence” (38). An additional problem in patriarchal societies, Kate argues, is the expectations that with marriage women should turn into perfect wives and mothers. Yet, as her personal experience demonstrates, “during her brief marriage to Ray, Kate was neither transformed into the perfect mother nor the wicked step-mother” (33). If the novel started as a daughter-centric narrative, by the end it is transformed into a matrifocal one. Kate’s decision to finish her step-

mother's quilt represents an acknowledgement of the importance of matrilineal traditions and of forms of communication that go beyond language and, as in Melfi's book, involve practical skills.

To conclude, both books stress the need to move beyond the patriarchal model of motherhood and they do so also through their structure. Melfi's memoir, for instance, is divided into six sections according to the key dates of the Holy Week: Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, plus Easter Monday. According to traditions, Palm Sunday celebrates the last week of Jesus's life but significantly Melfi's book does not end with Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. The author chooses instead to include Easter Monday, a festival of pagan origin that is not related to the bible. Easter Monday is also known as Renewal Monday and is often celebrated with Easter egg hunts, with eggs being an ancient symbol of a new life. It could be argued that through the reference to Easter Monday Melfi is stressing the need to move beyond the Christian tradition that is responsible for a notion of motherhood that keeps women in a subordinate position. Whilst the opening chapter is entitled "The Voice of God," the last one (as previously seen) is simply called "Biscotti" thus confirming the complete transition from a daughter-centric to a matrifocal narrative. Similarly, Gunn's novel is structured according to four principles that are used by Kate in her job as an archaeologist: extinctions, adaptations, isolations and resurrections. The idea of resurrection is particularly visible in the last chapter when Kate, having left her father's house knowing that Joe had lied to her about Iris, starts questioning the meaning of home and realises that only Iris could have provided her with a sense of bearing and direction. This is why on the highway she stops the car on the hard shoulder and wanders into the night, imagining "Iris swimming through the sand and soil, surfacing to confirm or deny Joe's story" (268). Significantly, she also dreams of burning her father's letters:

The letters catch immediately. Her words explode into fans of fire. She cups her hands to hold them, even when they burn her palms, she cups her hands to contain the withering edges, which shrink farther and farther into ash. When they are spent, she rubs her hands together and blows. (268)

Through this symbolic gesture, Kate seems to signal that only when the patriarchal discourse has truly erased the voice of women, even "extinct" ones like Iris, will finally be heard.

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