Two sides of the same coin: Challenging the Mother-Daughter Trope in Contemporary Italian Women's Writings.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I engage with the tradition of writing about the mother in order to explore how the representation of the mother-daughter relationship has evolved in the works of contemporary Italian women writers. Within the corpus of mother-daughter narratives, I have looked for novels that, departing from the dominant pattern characterised by maternal passivity and by the predominance of daughters' narrations, endowed the mother and the daughter with the same degree of agency.

I have focused on the expression of maternal subjectivity and I demonstrate how select women writers have subverted the passive idealisation of the maternal figure by challenging the wide-spread representation of the mother as a silent object.

I have chosen four novels, which allowed me to trace an evolution in the expression of the maternal voice, framed in a mother-daughter plot: Goliarda Sapienza's *L'Arte della Gioia* (1994 and 2008), Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), Valeria Parrella's *Lo Spazio Bianco* (2008) and Michela Murgia's *Accabadora* (2009). While still placing a definite stress on the mother-daughter relationship, these texts present maternal models that challenge the male-dominated symbolic order, forge filial bonds outside of bloodlines and normative family paradigms, and widen the notion of motherhood to include tasks that do not necessarily hinge on child-rearing.

Drawing from ancient Greek myth, psychoanalysis, feminist thought and literary theory I analyse how the experience of motherhood, disentangled from its bodily functions, becomes a relational practice, where the maternal perspective gradually emerges as dominant, although never completely severed from the daughter's.

By redesigning the mother-daughter relationship, the novels discussed in the thesis also challenge the cultural context in which the mother-daughter plot is inscribed, revealing an underpinning logic that differs from a patriarchal symbolic through recurrent slippage between a patriarchal and a non-patriarchal frame of reference, which is, to some extent, consequential to their critique of maternal silence and passivity.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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As the protagonists of the novels I analyse in my thesis, I too experienced the mother-daughter relationship from both sides. After the birth of my daughter Livia Elsa half-way through the candidature, my perspective on motherhood has changed. Although unwittingly, Livia Elsa has been an important part of this project too. I hope she will never resent me for the time I spent on my work. I wish, instead, I demonstrated to her how combining motherhood and self fulfilment is an achievable goal for a woman who believes in what she does.

While I am writing, I am pregnant with my second baby -a boy, this time. I do not believe in coincidences. Time has come for me to move towards a different project, and to take leave from the whole mother-daughter plot, at least for a while.

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INTRODUCTION

"We are, none of us, 'either' mothers or daughters;
to our amazement, confusion
and greater complexity, we are both."
(Rich: 253)

In this thesis I engage with the tradition of writing about the mother in order to explore how the representation of the mother-daughter relationship has evolved in the works of contemporary Italian women writers. Within the corpus of mother-daughter narratives, I have looked for novels that departed from the dominant pattern characterised by "daughter-centricity" (Daly and Reddy, 1991: 2) and maternal passivity and allowed for a different perspective on the maternal-filial bond. Since my interest focuses on motherhood and freedom of choice, I have paid special attention to how mothers are represented. Therefore, browsing through innumerable accounts of maternal powerlessness and silence in recent women's writings, I was driven by the desire to discover an alternative representation of the maternal figure in narratives hinged on the mother-daughter bond. For this reason, I have privileged novels in which the mother and daughter are given the same degree of agency and are able to talk to each other on equal terms, as peers.

Four novels struck me for their originality: Goliarda Sapienza's *L'Arte della Gioia* (1994 and 2008), Igiaba Scego's *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), Valeria Parrella's *Lo Spazio Bianco* (2008) and Michela Murgia's *Accabadora* (2009). While they locate themselves within the mother-daughter trope, these texts specifically question some of its recurring aspects, such as the centrality of the daughter's speaking voice, the impossibility for mother and daughter to speak to each other, and the notion of motherhood as an experience that engulfs any other layer of a woman's life. All the novels have been published, or, in the case of *L'Arte della Gioia*, reached public acclaim, almost simultaneously over the last few years. In these texts I have traced the elements that allow for a re-thinking of the mother-daughter relationship on different terms.

A unifying feature in the four novels is the representation of a disruption within the thematic

continuity. In fact, while still placing a definite stress on the mother-daughter relationship, the novels selected present maternal models that overtly challenge the male-dominated symbolic order, forge filial bonds outside of bloodlines and normative family paradigms, and widen the notion of motherhood to include tasks that do not necessarily hinge on child-rearing. Not only do they interrupt the established predominance of the filial speaking position, but each novel provides an original interpretation of the intricacies of the mother-daughter bond and suggests new modes of relational practices between women.

Another aspect that attracted my attention is that in these novels the roles of mother and daughter appear as interconnected as two sides of the same coin. Neither is completely able to overshadow the other, so that they create an unprecedented equilibrium. The mother-daughter relationships they portray reflect and magnify the intricacy of the maternal bond, which, according to Adriana Cavarero (2007) is twofold by definition, insofar as “ognuna di noi, visto che esiste, ha avuto sicuramente una madre, e ognuna di noi, prima di essere probabilmente a sua volta madre, è stata figlia di quella madre” (46).

Through the protagonists of *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Oltre Babilonia*, *Lo Spazio Bianco* e *Accabadora*, I explore the extent to which motherhood affects women's identities and the extent to which a woman's identity is shaped by her previous relationship to a mother. To begin with, the four novels redesign the notion of the maternal role. Far from having their identity as women entirely defined by their maternal role, in these narratives women are simultaneously mothers and something else: professionals, intellectuals, socially and publicly recognised figures. *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Oltre Babilonia*, *Lo Spazio Bianco* and *Accabadora* represent motherhood mainly as a relational practice, and not as a social duty, or a biological destiny. Motherhood is, therefore, not necessarily a physical experience and it can be a temporary role. In fact, in these novels some women become mother and daughter because of a mutual choice, and after a while they part company. Despite the profound differences in the social and generational backgrounds of the authors, the four novels interpret motherhood as one of the numerous possible experiences in a woman's life. To be a mother is one of the layers of a complex female identity, indeed a very important one in the hierarchy, but no longer, and not simply, 'the' one.

Not only do these mother-daughter dyads challenge a patriarchal idea of femininity and motherhood, but their representations of gendered identities also reflect a disruption of previous genealogies: they break the mould of 'institutionalised motherhood' as the primary role, and offer alternative role models to younger women. An alternative idea of genealogy emerges, which departs from the traditional notion of family and kinship and is based on conscious choices rather than bloodlines.

Finally, by rejecting the patriarchal tenet of maternal subordination, the mothers depicted in these novels are powerful, or gain power, during the narrated events. This is the most original feature of the four novels, and is underlined by the fact that the mother's voice also emerges along with the daughter's. In fact, this parallel subjectivity of mother and daughter is very unusual in narratives.

From a daughterly viewpoint, these novels present women who are aware that mothers can be vessels of patriarchal values and, therefore, interrogate themselves on how to find different maternal models and ties. By framing their investigations in multiple, and sometimes unconventional, mother-daughter plots, Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia explore how women can build alternative modes of relationship with other women in order to "establish the ties which a woman really needs, between body and words, between herself and her peers" (Muraro 1991a: 125). Through these narratives, I investigate how relationships between women work when they are disentangled from patriarchal constraints, and how they can help women to freely express their desires and ambitions.

By recasting the mother-daughter relationship through its fictional rendition, these novels also challenge the cultural context in which the mother-daughter plot is inscribed. The re-discovery of the mother-daughter bond and its re-evaluation poses the question whether, and to what extent, the four novels suggest a new scenario in terms of symbolic frame of reference. These narratives reveal an underpinning logic that differs from a patriarchal symbolic through recurrent slippage between a patriarchal and a non-patriarchal frame of reference.

This last observation calls into question a meta-textual issue, in relation to the narrative strategies these writers adopt in order to deal with a symbolic order which is not the dominant one. In fact, the effort to express, describe and refer to this alternative frame of reference not only influences language and narrative structures, but also leads the writers to push and cross several boundaries. From the beginning of the twentieth century Italian women writers, including Sibilla Aleramo to name just one, realised that the language at their disposal was shaped by a dominant male culture. Their response was either the attempt to create an *écriture féminine*, or to adhere to an implicit acceptance of the maleness of language, the most evident effect of which was the silence imposed on women, and especially on mothers' voices, for such a long time. In fact, as Audre Lorde (1984) famously argued, it is not possible to dismantle the master's house by using his own tools. The metaphor refers to the fact that women writers speak from within a male-centred culture and in a language that articulates woman as Other. For these reasons, they have to re-invent the language if they are to express their own voice appropriately. In order to overcome these difficulties, Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia each develop different tools and try to overcome the silence imposed on maternal subjectivity by describing it, by making it speak, by breaking it, by endowing the mother

with her own voice, or by fragmenting the self in to a multiplicity of speaking positions. Their protagonists use different kinds of alternative forms of expression, such as bodies, dreams, and non verbal means of communications. As I demonstrate through a close reading of the novels, a variety of narrative strategies is deployed to express elements of a thought that does not belong to the dominant symbolic order and that has the potential to point in the direction of a new female-centred mode of symbolisation.

Other literary critics have explored the difficulties experienced by women writers who engaged with daughters' narratives (Sambuco, 2012; Benedetti, 2007; Scacchi, 2005; Giorgio, 2002; and others). Here I focus on how these difficulties affect the expression of maternal subjectivity. As Muraro duly observes, patriarchal societies represent and love a silenced mother, “amano una madre muta” (1991: 13), and this attitude is mirrored in women's writings. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that some recent women writers have challenged this passive idealisation of the maternal figure. In the following chapters I analyse how literary texts have begun to challenge the wide-spread representation of the mother as a silent object.

The first chapter reconstructs the theoretical and historical background of my research. To begin, I map out the theory that supports my analysis and enables me to demonstrate how the selected texts challenge and reinvent existing or conventional ways of representing the mother-daughter relationship. I pay particular attention to the elaborations of Italian theorists on the “pensiero della differenza sessuale” and to the work of Luce Irigaray, in as far as there are striking correspondences that appear between feminist theoretical debates and the issues emerging from the novels under investigation. Following this theoretical discussion, I provide an overview of how Italian women writers have represented motherhood in relation to the mother-daughter relationship during the last century. My purpose is to acknowledge a tradition and to appraise how innovative the selected novels are within that tradition.

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 each engage with a textual analysis of the selected novels. I dedicate one chapter to each novel. In Chapter 2, I analyse Sapienza's *L'Arte della Gioia*, a novel that deconstructs the mother-daughter biological bond and suggests that unprecedented kinds of relationships between women can be forged. Sapienza wrote her novel during the late 1960s and 1970s, so that this text does not belong to the same generation as the others discussed in this thesis. In spite of the chronological gap separating this novel from the others, I chose to begin my discussion with *L'Arte della Gioia* because it radically challenges the notions of the mother and motherhood, and expands the idea of what is traditionally understood as a mother-daughter relationship.

To begin with, motherhood is depicted in *L'Arte della Gioia* as an elective bond, not necessarily based on bloodlines. To be a mother can be a voluntary and dynamic condition, subject to change, and not permanently assigned. Furthrmore, mothers are endowed with maternal authority and are able to provide empowering models to their daughters, suggesting a female solidarity that, to some extent, anticipates the feminist re-evaluation of the maternal and of the mother-daughter bond. In this ground-breaking novel, relationships between women are validated by an unprecedented female authority, prefiguring and even suggesting a mode of symbolisation that provides an alternative to the male-dominated system. Female subjectivity finds its expression through the voice of the protagonist, who interprets it in a way that interweaves both maternal and filial subjectivity, while challenging the notion of gendered and socially determined roles.

Sapienza's revolutionary interpretation of the maternal function paves the way to the novels by Scego, Parrella and Murgia, which I analyse in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Their novels, as well, hinge on mother-daughter dyads that depart from the pattern explored by women writers during the 1980s and 1990s and, by following Sapienza's cue, gradually move from a patriarchal context toward a different socio-symbolic frame of reference.

If Sapienza unfastens the biological bond, in *Oltre Babilonia* Scego reties it by staging at the centre of her narration two mothers and their biological daughters, as I show in Chapter 3. *Oltre Babilonia* combines the conflicts implicit in the mother-daughter relationship with the pain and displacement generated by migration and exile, and presents the reader with two mother-daughter dyads engaged in a dialogue over their multiple differences (racial, cultural, social, linguistic, generational and psychological). In both mother-daughter pairs the maternal bond is initially presented as problematic and painful. Through the experience of narration, both bonds are reforged on a new basis.

In this novel the two mothers both speak in the first person, both address their adult daughter. Overturning the generally passive role of mothers in narratives, Scego's novel provides both mothers and daughters with their own voices in which to articulate and resolve their conflicts, and tries to formulate some answers to the daughter's quest for maternal love and recognition. In addition, these two mother-daughter dyads gradually develop into a chain of women that crosses several chronological, cultural, geographical and ethnic boundaries, insofar as the narrations reconstruct the daughters' female genealogies. In this network of female solidarity, the mother maintains a pivotal role and gains an unprecedented subjectivity.

While Scego's female genealogies expand both vertically and horizontally through the combination of biological motherhood and other types of relationship between women, Parrella's text positions itself at the opposite end of the spectrum. In *Lo Spazio Bianco* maternal and filial

points of view are embodied by the same character/woman, who is depicted in transition from one role to the other. Mother-daughter bonds are deconstructed and reshaped through the experience of a woman who locates herself entirely outside patriarchal constraints. In this de-patriarchalised context mother and daughter are more than the two sides of the same coin. Mother and daughter coincide here in one character, who is at the centre of the narration. Even though in the novel three generations of women appear, there is only one who gains voice and subjectivity simultaneously as mother and as daughter.

The novel I analyse in Chapter 5, *Accabadora*, hinges on a mother-daughter dyad formed by an older woman and a girl who are not biologically related. Far from proposing a simplified opposition of bad mother versus good mother, *Accabadora* suggests a multifaceted notion of parenthood, seen as a temporary condition. While in *Lo Spazio Bianco* the mother-daughter dyad is embodied by one single character, *Accabadora* clearly demonstrates that maternal discourse can be plural.

In this chapter, I discuss how maternal and filial subjectivities find their balance when they belong to two distinct characters and what happens to the mother-daughter bond when motherhood is no longer perceived as a whole, but is fragmented into separate functions. While Parrella's choice recomposes the unity of the mother-daughter dyad in a way that emphasises the solitude of the protagonist, in Murgia's novel the mother-daughter dyad is split into two distinct roles that do not overlap. The maternal role is also disengaged from the child-rearing function, so that the mother becomes the last mother, that is, a mother who kills, and who is killed at the hand of the daughter.

Accabadora recalls and reinterprets two crucial aspects of Sapienza's novel: the centrality of temporary parenthood, and matricide as part of the mother-daughter relationship. Through the combination of a wide variety of mother-daughter relationships, the four novels suggest a different way of renegotiating the maternal bond. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the whole picture of the mother-daughter plot, it is necessary to begin by examining the most common representation of mothers, mother-child dyads and motherhood in the Italian cultural landscape. This is the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 1.
Recasting the Mother-Daughter Relationship: Mothers and Daughters in the Twentieth Century Cultural Landscape.

"We must not once more kill the mother
who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture."
(Luce Irigaray, 1991: 43)

"Certainly there she was, [my mother]
in the very centre of that great Cathedral space
which was childhood; there she was from the very first."
(Virginia Woolf, 1985: 81)

1. Beyond maternal idealisation: not only Mothers and Sons

In the Italian cultural landscape mothers are - or have been - traditionally considered as mothers of sons. As Italian philosophers have highlighted, the mother-son bias is evident in the field of philosophy, in that "la società patriarcale, nella quale la filosofia si è sviluppata, cura l'amore tra la madre e il figlio come il suo bene più prezioso (Muraro, 1991: 13). In this context, the mother-daughter relationship is marginalised, or excluded. In psychoanalytical theory, too, a similar imbalance can be detected. In Freudian theory the Oedipal paradigm idealises the mother-son relationship to the detriment of the daughter, who soon develops hostility towards the mother. The son's love for his mother, instead, lasts all through life (Irigaray, 1987). Analysing Catholic iconography, Luisa Accati contends that in the representation of motherhood women are passive elements, in relation to the son. Motherhood is a gift from God or, in her words, "is essentially seen as *teotokos*: the focus is on the son's birth" (2006: 188).

Scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have interrogated the hegemonic position of the mother-son dyad in Italian culture and society. In her historical survey on the role and representation of Italian mothers, Marina D'Amelia (2005) argues that after Unification mothers are

epitomised as mothers of adult sons, with whom they develop an exclusive and special bond that marginalises other family ties. To bring a male child into the world is supposed to be a woman's highest accomplishment (Muraro, 1991: 150). In this context, when daughters are mentioned, they are subordinated to the ambitions and glorification of the sons. In both European and Anglo-American contexts, several thinkers, such as Cavarero (2007), Rich[1] (1976), Hirsch[2] (1989), Irigaray[3] (1987) have shown how the mother-daughter relationship has been systematically excluded from Western culture. Their revision of the archetypal mother-daughter dyad, as represented in the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, demonstrates how this mythological pair is the first and only literary representation of the mother-daughter dyad within the horizon of Western culture. As Cavarero (2007) argues, patriarchal societies soon obliterated Demeter and her daughter, replacing them with the mother-son relationship:

> La relazione madre-figlia che si ritrova nel mito, è rarissima nella storia della cultura. Nella storia della cultura d'occidente, poi, come sapete bene, viene sostituita da una relazione celeberrima e con una potenza simbolica immane, che è la relazione madre-figlio nella figura di Maria e Gesù (47).

In the same period, Italian literature reflects a similar bias and goes even further. During the twentieth century, not only do narratives represent mothers in a privileged relationship with their sons, most of them also strengthen the maternal position of dependence and passivity. As Laura Benedetti maintains, “the representations of motherhood found in Italian literature are, almost invariably, images of the mother seen through the eyes of her son” (4).

Luisa Muraro suggests an explanation for the fact that, in Western culture, the daughter's love for her mother has been forgotten, belittled or condemned to silence. As she contends,

> La nostra civiltà non è fatta perché una donna impari questo amore [per la madre]: non c'è arte, né religione, né filosofia dell'amore femminile della madre. Questa vuol essere *una civiltà dell'amore assolutamente maschile per la madre*, a tal punto che più volte ci capita di notare la preferenza materna per il figlio maschio, e ne siamo ferite, com'è

1 “The loss of the the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy […]; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother daughter passion and rapture. There was such a recognition, but we have lost it. It was expressed in the religious mystery of Eleusis, which constituted the spiritual foundation of Greek life for two thousand years. Based on the mother-daughter myth of Demeter and Kore, this rite was the most forbidden and secret of classical civilisation” (Rich: 237-8).

2 Her essay *The Mother-Daughter plo*t “takes as its point of departure the intersection of familial structures and structures of plotting, attempting to place at the centre of inquiry mothers and daughters, the female figures neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures” (3).

3 I refer in particular to two essays: “Body against Body: in Relation to the Mother” and “Divine Women”.

> naturale, e non vediamo che la causa della preferenza non è un'ingiustizia materna, ma una caratteristica della nostra cultura (1992: 12, *emphasis mine*).

In this "civiltà dell'amore assolutamente maschile per la madre" the daughter's position is unmistakably awkward and uncomfortable. None of the mentioned fields of knowledge ("arte, religione, filosofia") focuses on the "amore femminile della madre".

Given the emphasis placed on the mother-son bond in the Italian context, the emergence of the mother-daughter relationship in the cultural arena represents a ground-breaking novelty. As Adalgisa Giorgio (2002) observes, marginality and weakness have characterised the mother-daughter relationship for a long time (and not only in Italy), so that "at the level of symbolic and imaginary structures" this bond is "an *un-thought* in contemporary Western cultures" (119 *emphasis mine*). Referring to the Italian social context, Muraro (1991) uses the same words:

> Con il femminismo abbiamo scoperto che, nella nostra civiltà, la condizione umana era declinata unicamente al maschile e tutta disposta intorno al rapporto madre-figlio [...] C'è dunque un *impensato* della condizione umana, racchiuso nella relazione madre-figlia (150 *emphasis mine*).

Muraro's observation explains why the mother-daughter relationship has been either entirely neglected by authors of both sexes, or represented as highly problematic.

The texts produced during the first half of the twentieth century reflect a social structure, in which women's subjection and repression is enforced by law. Mothers depicted in these narratives are perceived through the lens of a patriarchal culture. These patriarchal mothers are represented as passive and silent victims of a male-centred order to which they sacrifice themselves, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes unwittingly. More often than not, the mother is an upholder of patriarchy and, therefore, an opponent to the daughter's quest for freedom, happiness and self-fulfilment.

A decisive shift occurred during the 1970s, when theoretical studies and literary texts devoted an unprecedented attention to motherhood and to mothers. As a consequence, the mother-daughter relationship, too, underwent a radical revision. This happened simultaneously in Anglo-American and European contexts. In Italy, the radical turning point occurred during the 1980s, when the mother and her relationship with the daughter became crucial in both theoretical discourses and literary production. In the wake of the second wave of feminism, both women philosophers and writers devoted a huge body of work to investigate the primary relationship between women. From this moment on, the mother-daughter theme became increasingly recurrent, to the extent that it can now be considered as a well-established literary *topos*, at least in female-authored narratives.

From the 1970s onwards, theorists developed a new discourse on the mother and the maternal role in order to re-evaluate the female experience and the expression of a female subjectivity. Considered as 'the Other' and excluded from language and culture (De Beauvoir, Rich, Kristeva, Irigaray) woman was denied subjectivity and referred to as an object. The conquest of a speaking position as a woman became a starting point in many feminist theories and works (Cixous, Wittig, Rich and others).

The search for a female subjectivity in theoretical discourse was paralleled in literature by narratives that attempted to give voice to the mother-daughter story and bring it out of silence. However, in spite of the interest elicited by the mother-daughter dyad in literature as well as in theoretical studies, a bias still persisted in the representation of this relationship. The voice that breaks the silence during the last three decades is almost exclusively the voice of the daughter. The mother-daughter plot, therefore, has remained incomplete so far, as the second epigraph to this chapter exemplifies.

Virginia Woolf's autobiographical remark epitomises how women writers tend to talk about mothers, but are reluctant to speak as mothers themselves. The mother is silent, “located at the centre of the cathedral”, majestic, static, maybe adored, and as passive as an idol. The absence of maternal subjectivity in narratives is not specific to Italian culture and has attracted the attention of scholars who have interrogated the “daughter-centricity” of narratives and theories produced by women (Daly and Reddy, 1991: 2).

In the Italian context, however, the reluctance to give voice to the mother is particularly evident. As Benedetti (2007) maintains, “women writers who have reflected on motherhood have done so almost exclusively as daughters” (5). Patrizia Sambuco (2012) has recently demonstrated how in the last few decades Italian women writers have often chosen to give subjectivity to the daughter's point of view in an attempt to develop a female discourse outside the patriarchal symbolic. As Sambuco remarks, although in the “socio-historical picture the figure of the daughter appears neglected, […] she emerges in literature as the centre of the narration” (2012: 6), as exemplified by the predominance of daughters' narratives. The texts Sambuco analyses, therefore, equate female subjectivity with daughterly subjectivity, while the maternal is largely unexpressed.

Prior to the novels analysed by Sambuco (mostly published during the 1980s and 1990s), in Italian women writers's narratives the daughter's perspective tended to overshadow the mother's. The pioneer of change was Sibilla Aleramo in her autobiographical novel *Una Donna* (1906). In her heartfelt account, Aleramo denounced the damaging maternal role handed down to her and expressed her wish for a different relationship with her mother. In spite of her desire to make an alliance with her mother in a male-dominated culture, and in an attempt not to fight against her,

when dealing with the mother-daughter relationship Aleramo can only assume a daughterly perspective. She herself can speak as a mother only in relation to her son. When her narrative engages with the mother-daughter relationship, maternal subjectivity is absent.

After Aleramo, women writers dealt with the mother-daughter plot by representing dysfunctional dynamics, with mothers "cast as absent, incompetent, distant" and "daughters that tend to be modeled on the subdued type or the rebel type" (Splendore, 186). These features especially characterise the narratives published during the 1980s and 1990s, in which the prevailing pattern is that of a daughter evoking her mother's memory after her death. These novels focus on daughters who are fraught with an unrequited desire to converse with their mothers, a desire which is frustrated due to the confronting maternal indifference or due to the mother's death.

The distant, half-idealised, half-denigrated mother portrayed in these works has no subjectivity, a characteristic found in most of the Italian literature of the last century. An isolated exception is Alba de Cèspedes' novel *Quaderno Proibito* (1952), which gives voice and subjectivity to a woman who is the mother of an adult daughter. However, the mother's self-annihilating attitude makes her unable to talk to her daughter. It also prevents any identification on the part of the daughter, who bitterly blames her mother for not supporting her in her struggle against the limits imposed on women's freedom.[4] To her great astonishment Benedetti admits that "considering the emphasis placed on motherhood in the Italian cultural landscape, it was surprising to discover the limited space literature has devoted to mothers *as subjects*" (4).

The difficulty of speaking as mothers associates writers with theorists. In her historical reconstruction of the 1968 uprisings, Anna Bravo warns that

> chi rimprovera alle femministe anni 70 (e post) di essersi sempre viste nel ruolo di figlie, dimentica che sono state le prime a affrontare come fatto politico il bisogno femminile di amore materno e il dolore di non trovarlo" (2008: 148).

As Sambuco suggests, Bravo's statement about feminists also works well in describing the situation of daughters in fiction. Furthermore, it certainly mirrors a feeling experienced by several women writers.

2. Theoretical Paradigms

The "re-discovery" of the mother-daughter relationship characterises the last decades of the twentieth century in both the Anglo-American and the European context. Earlier, very few, albeit

4 Another text staging a mother speaking as a subject is Fabrizia Ramondino's play *Terremoto con Madre e Figlia*, (1994) which I do not consider here because it is not a novel.

important, female voices raised the issue of the troubled mother-daughter relationship. Virginia Woolf elaborates an idea of the maternal in which the mother, not necessarily a biological mother, can be an ally and a figure of positive identification for a woman. This is apparent in both her autobiographical and fictional writings, and is visible in *Moments of Being* (1976) as well as in *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Locating herself at the opposite end of the spectrum, Simone De Beauvoir (1949) focuses on the difficulty arising from the relationship between mother and daughter, which is much more dramatic than that between mother and son:

> In her daughter the mother does not hail a member of a superior caste; in her she seeks a double. She projects upon her daughter all the ambiguity of her relation with herself; and when the otherness of this alter ego manifests itself, the mother feels herself betrayed (496).

Although from different perspectives, both Woolf and de Beauvoir pave the way for the later feminist scholars' investigation of the mother-daughter relationship and its influence on women's identity. Their investigations, however, remained isolated examples until the 1970s, when scholarly studies started devoting an unprecedented attention to the maternal figure.

In the early 1970s, feminists and women intellectuals investigating the connections between female identity and motherhood tended to assume exclusively a daughterly point of view. This attitude, already evident in Simone de Beauvour's account of her childhood, especially in the bitter portrait of her young, frustrated, ill-tempered mother (*Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter,* 1958), also characterises the work of other writers and theorists. In the Anglo-American context, for instance, Germaine Greer assumes a similar attitude in her best known text, *The Female Eunuch* (1970). The rejection of the mother characterises the texts of authors such as Nancy Friday (*My Mother/Myself: A Daughter's Search for Identity*, 1977), or theorists such as Shulamith Firestone (1970), who, devaluing the gendered female body, claimed, in the name of women's liberation, that women be released from the burden of procreation. In general, the disavowal of the institution of motherhood as experienced by their mothers led these theorists and writers to look at motherhood with suspicion. As Ann Dally observes in 1983, a full reconciliation between feminism and motherhood has not occurred yet (168-9). In that same year, Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues that there are two evident limits of feminist thought during these decades

> Contemporary Western feminist thought has been charged with being not only a white middle-class movement, but also a white middle class daughter's movement (21).

Yet, from the late 1970s onwards the initial hostility toward the mother begins to be mitigated through a re-evaluation of the maternal body and functions, which leads to a re-appraisal of the mother's relationship with the daughter. Gradually, theorists began to cast a different light on the complexities of the primary relationship between women. In other words, they realised “how a feminist philosophy has to deal primarily with the mother-daughter relationship as a way to understand the formation of a female identity with respect to her mother figure” (Lucamante: 31-2).

This shift in perspective occurred simultaneously in different contexts. In Italy, Carla Lonzi (1974) was the first thinker who highlighted the distinction between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and women's power to procreate. She contends that “non è il figlio che ci ha fatto schiave, ma il padre” (40). Lonzi also identified the responsibility of psychoanalysis in reinforcing women's exclusion from power and subjectivity: “Dietro il complesso di Edipo non c'è il tabù dell'incesto, ma lo sfruttamento di questo tabù da parte del padre a sua salvaguardia” (42). In the following decades, feminist scholars investigated more broadly the role of classical psychoanalysis in relation to female identity and to gender's construction.

A few years later, a group of Anglo-American theorists such as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Sara Ruddick, Carol Gilligan, Marianne Hirsch and others shifted the emphasis of their investigation to the link between motherhood and the mother-daughter bond. In her very influential text *Of Woman Born* (1976), Rich laid the foundation stone of this unprecedented approach towards the maternal and the mother-daughter relationship. On the one hand, Rich untangles the two meanings of the term motherhood, “one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential - and all women - shall remain under male control” (13). On the other hand, her text advocates for the daughter's need to rediscover her relationship with the maternal as a point of departure for women who want to be free and strong.

According to Rich, the ambivalence towards the maternal figure stems from the double role played by the mother in the transmission of patriarchal values to the daughter. On the one hand, the mother teaches the daughter the expectations of her own sex through her words and even more through her own example, as long as “the mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter” (243). On the other hand, the mother has the power to interrupt this transmission and provide the daughter with a different set of values, which include an unprecedented solidarity between women, especially mothers and daughters. Rich encourages women to take up the second option.

In addition, Rich points out the difficulty for women to speak about their own mother:

> It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story, other landscapes would be revealed. But in my landscape or hers, there would be old, smouldering patches of deep-burning anger (221).

While wholeheartedly re-appraising the mother-daughter bond in her theory, Rich is fully aware of the complexities that characterise the maternal relationship in real life, to which she refers as the "old, smouldering patches of deep-burning anger".

Two years later, Nancy Chodorow interrogated the link between motherhood and the mother-daughter bond from a psychoanalytical perspective. In her essay *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) Chodorow develops the notion that mothering is a reproduction of oneself as daughter and woman. Analysing the literary representations of the maternal bond in her *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), Marianne Hirsch demonstrated that the mother-daughter tie is essential not only to the identity construction of both women, but also to the daughter's attitude towards her own potential as a mother. Her analysis of selected women's writings shows how "the greatest tragedy that can occur between mother and daughter is when they cease being able to speak and to listen to one another" (199). By examining the awkwardness characterising the dialogue between mothers and adult daughters, Hirsch highlights how

> the sympathy we could muster for ourselves and each other as *mothers*, we could not quite transfer to our own mothers. Although as mothers we were eager to tell our stories, as daughters we could not fully listen to our mothers' stories (26).

These observations echoes Rich's statement on the difficulty for a woman to speak about her mother and lead Hirsch to addres women writers' reluctance to endow the mother with subjectivity.

Hirsch's remarks are not isolated and find immediate echo in the work of other scholars. Introducing a collection of essays on Anglo-American narrations of motherhood, Brenda Daly and Maureen T. Reddy observe how

> even in women's accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are strangely absent. We most often hear daughters' voices in both literary and theoretical texts about mothers, mothering, and motherhood, even in those written by feminists who are mothers (1991: 1).

Combining literary criticism, psychoanalysis and philosophy, the theorists I mention here open a

new thread of investigation of the mother-daughter bond. Significantly, Hirsch concludes her work with a question that calls for further development: “But what if [mother and daughter] inhabit the same body, what if they are the same person, speaking with two voices?” (199). Heralded by Hirsch's influential text, feminist thinkers gradually abandoned the privileged daughterly position and investigated the mother-daughter bond trying to combine both the mother and the daughter's standpoint.

While drawing from psychoanalysis, my investigation departs from the traditional psychoanalytic view that subjectivity formation demands a paternal third term (Freud, Lacan, Kristeva and others). I privilege, instead, a psychoanalytical approach that is based on an alternative conception of subject formation and that adopts a feminist perspective. In traditional Freudian theory, the Oedipal triangle involves father, mother and son. Psychoanalytical feminism has introduced the female child, along with the male, but has not challenged the objectification of the mother and her exclusion from desire. In addition, most feminist psychoanalytical accounts have been criticised because they rely excessively on the androcentric parameters established by male theorists. However, a few theorists, whom I consider in my analysis, manage to move beyond this limit. As Elizabeth Wright argues (1992: 263), the feminist psychoanalytical accounts fall into three main categories: Jungian accounts, revisionary Lacanian accounts and Freudian and neo-Freudian accounts. In my approach I draw useful insights from theorists of the second group (Irigaray) and third group (Benjamin).

My reading of the Oedipal paradigm is carried out through the lens of Irigaray's critique of Freudian theory and of its misinterpretation of the little girl's sexuality (1985). From the work of Irigaray I also draw the critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis, in that it dictates the erasure of the mother (and of women) from the symbolic order, also known as The-Law-of-the-Father. Through the exclusion of the mother from language, Lacanian theory reinforces the imbalance between the maternal and the paternal figures in the formation of a subject identity.[5]

In her attempt to overcome the passivity and the devaluation of the mother in the Oedipal structure, Jessica Benjamin emphasises the disparity between genders in Freudian theory and suggests the theory of an inter-subjective space of mutual recognition. Her critique of the Freudian paradigm offers some useful tools for my analysis of the mother-daughter bond. In *The Bond of Love* (1988) Benjamin investigates how the mother-child relationship is modelled on dynamics of domination and submission. The point of departure for Benjamin is Simone de Beauvoir's insight that the “woman functions as man's primary other” (8). While Woolf (1979 and 1993) and de Beauvoir explored the reason of women's subjugation from a socio-economic perspective,

5 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, London: Routledge/Tavistock, 1977.

Benjamin focuses on women's participation in their own submission from a psychoanalytical point of view. Benjamin postulates that the structure of domination that characterises the bond between mother and infant is recognisable in relationships other than the mother-child dyad. The same structure of domination is at work behind the dynamics between genders, as long as “masculinity and femininity become associated with the postures of master and slaves” (8). The innovative aspect of her theory is that the postures of domination and submission can be turned into a relationship between equals when and whether mutual recognition occurs (12). Benjamin also argues (1995) that the devaluation of the mother's role and her consequential exclusion from a subject position are deeply rooted in the Oedipal paradigm. Her theory of an inter-subjective space of mutual recognition is her endeavour to create an alternative to the Oedipal structure and to overcome the passivity imposed on the maternal role within the Freudian structure.

In my use of psychoanalysis, I am also indebted to Alison Stone's hypothesis on how “we might become speaking subjects in relations of difference from and continuity with our mothers and the maternal body” (119). In this perspective, Stone's assumptions align themselves with Benjamin's notion of an inter-subjective space that works as a third term. Conversely, I mention Freud, Lacan and Kristeva only insofar as their insights explain the concept of the symbolical order of the father and the female (and maternal) exclusion from it.

Although Benjamin's analysis is not focused on the mother-daughter bond, her insights open many threads of investigation for me, because they suggest that the exclusion of women from the symbolical dimension is not irreversible. In Benjamin's theory individuals can interrupt or reverse the structures of domination, especially when these structures are based on gender. By rejecting the idea that the structure of domination based on gender is a given, Benjamin's theory shows a correspondence with Judith Butler's notion of gender as something we perform.

According to Butler, being at the same time “a matter of choice and a cultural construction” (2004a: 23) gender is not a given, but something we become. The philosopher rejects the distinction between sex and gender as anachronistic, and collapses the two categories into one another. Borrowing her words, “if gender is a way of existing one's body, and one's body is a situation, a field of cultural possibilities, […] then both gender and sex seem to be thoroughly cultural affairs” (2004a: 29). Following de Beauvoir's assumption (1949) that having a female body is very significant but still not enough to define a woman as such (63-4), Butler contends that “gender seems less a function of anatomy than one of its possible uses” (29). In fact, Butler defines sex as a “cultural norm which governs the materialisation of bodies” (1993:2-3). Body, namely a female body, is not a static given, but “a mode of desire” (25), whereas desire constitutes a fundamental element of subjectivity.

In spite of its being hinged on sexual desires and the conflicts they generate, Butler's theory works well when applied to the investigation of the mother-daughter relationship because it helps to frame the discourse on the development of maternal subjectivity. In fact, as in Butler's queer theory, the female characters portrayed by Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia, too, depart from social norms in terms of relational and sometimes sexual behaviour. In the pursuit of their desires, they tackle many of the issues theorised by Butler. For instance, many of them have to face the difficulties arising from the lack of recognition and aim at modifying hegemonic norms that prevent them from being socially recognised (Butler, 2004). Moreover, by developing relationships according to their own desires rather than to socially accepted paradigms, they redesign the notion of family and kinship.

On the one hand Butler hypothesises that a normative conception of gender can "undermin[e] the capacity to persevere in a liveable life" (2004: 1) for whoever does not conform with the norm. On the other hand, she suggests that subjects who do not fit into the categories of hegemonic heterosexuality and its patterns of kinship can challenge the current paradigm of family intelligibility by re-articulating their own families in light of their desires. In other words, social and sexual norms may be destabilised through the adoption and reiteration of unconventional patterns of behaviour. In none of the four novels I examine does family correspond to the hegemonic notion of the nuclear family, based on a heterosexual couple and their offspring. Likewise, kinship is not necessarily a consequence of bloodlines, but can be the result of a conscious choice through which women can form a bond of love and decide to become mothers and daughters, or sisters, in spite of their biological relationships. Moreover, kinship can be the outcome of (sexual) relationships that, to different extents, depart from "normative, dyadic heterosexually based family forms secured through the marriage vow" (Butler, 2004: 114). In this way, the protagonists of the selected novels defy established patterns and conventions and prefigure something entirely new in terms of social and family organisation.

Another example of kinship that is not based on bloodlines is represented by 'Othermothers' (Troester 1984). In African American communities, Othermothers are women who help biological mothers and share with them the responsibility of providing nurture and care for children. Othermothers are very important figures within the institution of Black motherhood and constitute another challenging alternative to the hegemonic (and patriarchal) notion of family and kinship. As Patricia Collins explains,

> In African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers, or blood-mothers, from other women who care for children.

> Biological mothers, or blood mothers, are expected to care for their children. But [these communities] have also recognised that, vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers – women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities – traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood" (1990: 119).

As a variation of (and a challenge to) the dominant conception of family and kinship, the notion of "othermothers" helps me to explain some aspects of motherhood that depart from the nuclear heterosexual family. Even though Collins and Troester refer to African-American contexts, I consider their insights valuable and applicable to the analysis of *Oltre Babilonia*, where being black is a relevant component of the identity of several characters and motherhood can be a shared responsibility.

However, in the field of feminist and gender studies, Butler has provided such an extensive analysis of alternative patterns of family and kinship that her work offers most of the analytical tools I use in dealing with this issue. Even though Butler does not engage directly with the quicksand of the maternal bond, her dismantling of the rules on which the notion of family and parenthood is built helps me to analyse that element of family represented by mother and daughter. By questioning the very notions of gender, sex, woman, femininity and the language we use to convey these concepts and meanings, Butler dialogues with feminist theory, into which she introduces new elements of criticism. While her work openly challenges and shakes some feminist assumptions, it also represents an unrelenting invitation to re-think the categories we use to define ourselves. By fostering an eclectic approach, Butler also warns us against the risks and limits of a dogmatic and exclusively feminist perspective.

In the European context, Luce Irigaray has provided the most valuable contribution to the investigation and the re-appraisal of the mother-daughter bond. Combining psychoanalysis and philosophy of language in her eclectic approach, the Irigaray attempts to demonstrate that the mother-daughter relationship is the place where the revaluation of a woman as a subject can be achieved. Her work on female subjectivity moves in the opposite direction to that of de Beauvoir in relation to the question of the Other. According to her,

> the question of who the other is has not been well formulated in Western tradition, in which the other is always the other of a singular subject and not another subject, irreducible to the masculine subject and of equal dignity (2000: 123-4).

Although acknowledging her debt to the French philosopher (2000: 122), Irigaray develops an original theory which hinges on the idea of a "two-subjects culture", a female and a male subjects. As she explains, "the paradigm of this two is to be found in sexual difference" (129).

Before postulating the necessity "to free the feminine subject from the world of man" (130), Irigaray explains the consequences of women's exclusion from subjectivity. In "Women-Mothers: the silent substratum of the social order" (1991), she argues that the patriarchal order denies women access to the symbolic. This exclusion is perpetrated by confining them to the role of mothers and procreators. As she questions:

> What is a mother? Someone who makes the stereotypical gestures she is told to make, who has no personal language and who has no identity. But how, as daughters, can we have personal relationship with or construct a personal identity in relation to someone who is no more than a function? (1991: 50).

As mothers, women are relegated to the condition of object. In order to become subject, therefore, women have to develop their own symbolic order. For Irigaray, this can be achieved only through the re-evaluation of the relationship between mother and daughter in which the two women consider each other as equals.

> In a sense, we need to […] establish a woman to woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters. That is an indispensable precondition for our emancipation from the authority of fathers. In our societies, the daughter-mother, mother-daughter relationship constitutes a highly explosive nucleus. Thinking it, and changing it, is equivalent to shaking the foundations of the patriarchal order (1991: 50).

This revised notion of the mother-daughter bond is disentangled from the idea of reproduction and hinges instead on the relational dimension. This notion of motherhood as a relational practice finds a variety of fictional renditions in the novels that I discuss in the next chapters. In the works by Sapienza, Scego and Murgia in particular we find an echo of Irigaray's insistence on the need that as women we build "a woman to woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers". Criticising the Oedipal paradigm, which forbids the daughter's return to the mother and exiles her into the male, paternal world, Irigaray suggests that woman recovers her relationship with the mother outside the experience of maternity:

> Woman must […] re-engender the maternal in herself, to give birth in herself to mother and daughter in a never accomplished progression. Mother is she who in shadow is in possession of the subterranean resource; daughter is she who moves about on the surface of the earth, in light (1985/2002: 240-1).

Echoing de Beauvoir, Woolf, Rich and other thinkers, Irigaray advocates that women should re-appropriate creativity as a maternal dimension. Her attention is focused on woman and mother as subjects of desire. This is the necessary condition that allows women to access a subject position. In the re-appropriation of female subjectivity, language plays a crucial role too. If the language we use reflects a male-dominated order, women need to invent a different means of expression in order to give voice to their distinct subjectivity:

> We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, with our bodies, the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and that of our daughters. We have to discover a language [*langage*], which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal (1991: 43).

Julia Kristeva, too, elaborates a theory with regard to the female exclusion from language. Irigaray, however, moves beyond Kristeva's stance. Kristeva's theory focuses on the maternal, and on the need to give centrality to the body, especially the maternal body (1988 and 1989). However, while emphasising the importance of the maternal function in the construction of subjectivity, Kristeva relegates the mother to the position of object. The mother is the means through which we can reach subjectivity, but maternal subjectivity is not an option in Kristeva's thought. Likewise, in Kristeva's elaborations there is no place for the mother-daughter relationship either, which she completely overlooks.

On the contrary, Irigaray is exclusively focused on female relationality as a way to achieve subjectivity. Her work dismantles the idea that women should adapt to a male-centered symbolic order, and encourages them to create a female-centred frame of reference. Irigaray suggests that only an inter-subjective relationship between mother and daughter allows women to access a female symbolic and she insists on the need for women to build both horizontal and vertical relationships. Not only do women need female genealogies, but also relationships between women in which mothers and daughters recognise each other as equals rather than locating themselves in a hierarchical structure.

In her radical revision of the maternal position within Western culture, Irigaray questions the validity of the Oedipal triangle as the only paradigm available for psychoanalysis to interpret the maternal role, especially in relation to the daughter. Her critique of Freudian theory finds its validation in the late writings of Freud himself. As the Belgian philosopher observes (1987), the father of psychoanalysis, too, admitted that the mother-daughter relationship and its importance in the development of the young girl has been greatly underestimated in psychoanalysis (63). Irigaray underlines how Freud makes his remarks on the mother-daughter dyad only at the end of his life, in the final pages of his work. His death precluded any further exploration.

Influenced by the work of Irigaray, Italian feminist theorists developed a theory of sexual difference calling for women to speak as autonomous female subjects. Much of the Italian feminist thought has been provided by two influential and interconnected groups: the philosophical community Diotima, which is a women-only philosophical research group formed in Verona in 1983 by women already engaged in the field of theoretical studies, and the Milan Women's Book-store Collective (Libreria delle Donne di Milano). Both centres focus on the thought of the sexual difference and some theorists belong to both. Muraro, for instance, had, and still has, a leading role in both the Milan and Verona groups.

A third group based in Florence, the Centro Documentazione Donna di Firenze, also engaged with the thought of the sexual difference and produced a detailed critique of Muraro's elaborations. These theorists privileged the psychoanalytical approach. One of the most significant publications connected to the Florence's group, *Corpo a Corpo con la Madre. Madre e Figlia nella Psicoanalisi* (2005) is devoted to the psychoanalytical investigation of the mother-daughter bond. As Gabriella Buzzati and Anna Salvo explain at the beginning of their volume,

> Il mito di Edipo, come struttura che fonda a un tempo le istanze psichiche individuali e le modalità di rapporto sociale, non solo allude a qualcosa di indicibile e misconosciuto, ma celebra, nel contempo, la centralità, il trionfo del legame che unisce il figlio maschio alla madre. La *relazione madre-figlia permane in un silenzio quasi impenetrabile* all'interno della nostra cultura (3 *emphasis mine*).

The centrality of the mother-son dyad and the marginalisation of the mother-daughter bond are two themes widely debated also by the Milan and Verona groups. In 1983 and 1987 the Women's Book-store Collective published two volumes that summarised the results of their political and philosophical research. Taking sexual difference as a starting point, the authors advocate the need

for women to trust themselves to another woman. In their words, women are encouraged to "praticare la disparità fra donne e [...] affidarsi a una propria simile per misurarsi nel mondo" (1987: 141). As long as a woman needs the mediation of another woman in order to access the social world, the collective's political and theoretical proposal is that women should adopt the practice of relationships ("pratica delle relazioni") or entrustment (*affidamento*) between women, "perché il sesso femminile trovi in sé la fonte del suo valore e la sua misura sociale" (145). In this way, women can build a female genealogy, that is, "un venire al mondo di donne legittimate dal riferimento alla loro origine femminile" (9). The concept of female genealogy holds great importance also in the context of women writers, as I will show both in the next section and in the following chapters.

Investigating the practice of relationships between women, the philosophers belonging to Diotima concentrate on the first bond between women, that is, the one with the mother. From the late 1980s onwards Diotima has produced a huge body of work, covering a wide range of aspects related to the concept of the maternal authority and its implication. The publications authored by Diotima focus on – among other topics - the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship and its influence on women's identity, from the first publication, *Il Pensiero della Differenza Sessuale* (1983), to one of the most recent *L'Ombra della Madre* (2007), in which the negativity and the shadowy aspects of the maternal are explored.

Besides the collective work of the different groups, an additional and invaluable contribution comes from a few prominent figures, such as Muraro and Cavarero. Adriana Cavarero, Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Verona, was co-founder of Diotima, to which she contributed for a long period. Her academic writings on sexual difference, on Plato, on Hannah Arendt and on theories of narration are widely recognised in Italy, Europe and the English-speaking world. Both the works of Muraro (*L'Ordine Simbolico della Madre*, 1991), and Cavarero (*Nonostante Platone,* 1990) draw inspiration from Irigaray's theory, which they develop further. In their discussion on sexual difference, Muraro, Cavarero (1990 and 2007) and other members of Diotima (1992, 1995 and 2007) focus on women's need to build a symbolic order of the mother that differs from the existing order of the father. They contend that a human being accesses subjectivity when part of a symbolic system and that women are precluded from this opportunity. As Giorgio explains:

> The (lack of) value mothers have in our society, the silence to which the mother-daughter relationship has been relegated in our culture, the lack of figures of female self-recognition and self-representation, a missing (suppressed) female genealogy

> preclude women from entering the symbolic […] and from becoming subjects (1997: 225).

Women are therefore affected by a lack of symbolic competence, or "competenza simbolica" (Muraro, 1991), that gives them the possibility to interpret their experience of the world, to make it "dicibile", and to use it as a tool to modify the world in order to fulfil their desires and aspirations. Rejecting the father as the source of symbolisation, Italian feminist theorists elaborate a theory of maternal authority which allows material and symbolic existence to both sexes. Muraro shares with Lacan the idea that symbolic production (or "la competenza simbolica") is tied to a patriarchal regime. Unlike the Lacanian theorists, however, Muraro, along with other Italian philosophers, believes that this situation is not immutable.

As Cavarero (1990) explains, "la cultura occidentale è ricca di figure nelle quali l'ordine simbolico […] si autorappresenta" (13). In this self-representation of Western culture, however, "le figure femminili trovano dunque posto *in riferimento* al soggetto maschile stesso che le decide" (14). Female figures, therefore, are not absent, but are excluded from their own subjectivity:

> Abbondano figure di madri, figlie e vergini, né mancano figure di incantatrici […], ma il quadro simbolico costante è appunto quello che decide la rappresentazione del femminile sulla centralità maschile, di modo che, inesorabilmente, ogni figura di donna si trova a giocare un ruolo il cui senso sta nei codici patriarcali che glielo hanno assegnato (13-4).

Cavarero's words embrace Irigaray's criticism of Western culture's androcentricity. A few years later, irigaray, in turn, echoes Cavarero's statements when she notes that "the philosophical subject, historically masculine, has reduced every other to a relation with himself - his nature, his universe, his complement, his projection, his inverse, his instrument - within his own world, his own horizon (2000: 126).

As both Irigaray and Cavarero observe, in a male-centred symbolical order, female figures are seen exclusively as objects. Therefore, they advocate the need to develop a different framework of reference for women. The key element in the construction of this alternative order is the notion of "madre simbolica", mainly elaborated by Muraro. As Dominijanni explains: "La madre simbolica fonda dunque la genealogia femminile, istituisce il movimento della disparità e della mediazione fra donne, ma non si incarna in nessuna donna" (1995:16). This symbolical mother, who cannot be embodied by a real woman, paves the way to the notion of female authority, which is "un bene comune" (Muraro, 1991: 141) and is based on a relational practice. Therefore, Diotima's

philosophers investigate *la pratica delle relazioni* with regard to relationships between women and concentrate on the tie with the mother. Insofar as the mother-daughter relationship is necessarily asymmetric, and implies a disparity ("disparità" is the word they use), Italian theorists elaborated the notion of maternal authority to explain how this asymmetrical relationship works.

Aware of the weakness of maternal figures in real life within Italian society (having experienced their mothers' powerlessness within the family), these thinkers emphasised the need for the mother both to gain recognition for, and to validate, her own authority. In the search for a new order apart from the patriarchal one, the Diotima group, and especially Muraro, "focus on the different ways in which the concept of authority works when placed in the context of mother-daughter relationship, as distinguished from the framework of paternal authority" (Scarparo, 2004: 208). Muraro insists on the necessity to create a new symbolic order based on maternal authority and tailored to women's needs, since "il reale, in assenza di simbolico, è meno di niente" (1991: 100).

According to these philosophers, through the recognition of maternal authority women can develop a special kind of relationship between women, that is, *affidamento* or entrustment. As Muraro explains, this is "a relationship that occurs when you tie yourself to a person who can help you achieve something which you think you are capable of but which you have not yet achieved" (1991a: 123). In her elaboration on the connection between maternal authority and entrustment Muraro (1991, 1996 and 1997) argues that the relationship of entrustment between one woman and another constitutes a social tie that provides answers, support, feedback, and points of reference in a society unable to support women otherwise. In this context, entrustment is regarded as a voluntary bond "which is simultaneously intimate and external, personal and social, which makes a coherent whole of being a woman and having a social existence" (1991a: 125).

Drawing from Luce Irigaray's critique of the psychoanalytical paradigm in which language is a system that denies any subjectivity to women, Italian feminist thinkers placed a great emphasis on the connection between mother and language.[6] According to Lacanian theory, language is a creation of the male Symbolic, so that the child needs to be separated from the mother in order to enter the symbolic and the world of language. In this way, the mother is denied any linguistic, symbolic and cognitive function. The work of Italian theorists, instead, refutes the Lacanian assumption of the exclusion of the mother from language and considers the mother as the primary language teacher. According to their definition, the mother is the one who "gives life and nourishment but also language to the world" (Dominijanni, 2004: 202). As Muraro maintains: "Noi impariamo a parlare dalla madre: questo definisce chi è la madre, che cos'è il linguaggio" (1991: 46).

6 See: Muraro (*L'Ordine Simbolico della Madre*, 1991) Cavarero (*Nonostante Platone*, 1990), Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino (2002) and Diotima (*Il Cielo Stellato dentro di Noi. L'Ordine Simbolico della Madre*, 1992).

Endorsing the idea that women are excluded from power, culture and language, Cavarero suggests that women adopt new forms of female narration more appropriate to their own specificity (1997), in order to make their experience speakable. She warns that "the female subject does not emerge from history by simply investigating her existence but must rather actively decide to be her own subject, to take herself as a starting point" (1991: 185). Cavarero here reflects Benjamin's analysis of women's participation in their own submission. For Benjamin, in fact,

> to halt this cycle of domination [...] women must claim their subjectivity [...] this means not to undo our ties to others, but rather to disentangle them; to make of them not shackles but circuits of recognition (221).

In relation to this last point, Cavarero departs from Muraro's and the Women's Book-store Collective notion of *affidamento* in that the relationship she theorises is not characterised by disparity, but is, instead, a bond between two women who consider each other as equals. Following the tradition of Hannah Arendt (1991), Cavarero rejects the hierarchical view of maternal authority postulated by Muraro, the Women's Book-store and Diotima, and describes the relationship between mother and daughter as "reciprocità di sguardi", an image that clearly rejects a relationship based on possession and obedience, in favour of a reciprocal bond, based on mutual recognition. This idea of mother-daughter relationship is close to Irigaray's notion of a "woman to woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers" (1991: 50).[7] Cavarero's elaboration, instead, coincides with those of other prominent feminists (such as Dominjanni, Cigarini, Muraro) in relation to the idea of "madre simbolica", that is, "[una] figura di libertà femminile, non individualistica ma relazionale" (Dominijanni: 1995: 17-8).[8]

Theoretical elaborations have been paralleled by the work of literary critics and scholars who are devoting increasing attention to the representation of the mother-daughter bond in contemporary Italian women writings. Feminist literary criticism has repeatedly used the concept of maternal authority as a theoretical tool to understand how the works of women writers relate to each other, in order to reconstruct a female 'literary genealogy'. The volume edited by Adalgisa Giorgio and Julia

7 According to Graziella Parati, here lies the originality of Diotima's thought: "Contrary to the individual of the male philosophical tradition, the individual and the subject are in no way autonomous or self-reliant – nor should they be. They are essentially relational. The individual becomes individual in her relationship with the other. However, this other is not just any other. It is, by definition, the (m)other, and the relationship is one of subjection and obedience to her authority" (2002: 66-7).

8 The feminist discourse on a female symbolic order is, to some extent, utopian. Utopia here has to be understood as a place that does not exist in the real world, but exists as a mental creation, as a platonic perfection towards which to model and from which to find inspiration. Although it is not a material entity, it provides the real world with a target to aim at. Much of the feminist theory I discuss here should be interpreted in this way.

Waters (2007) on contemporary European women writings, for instance, pays special attention to the way in which women writers develop the notions of literary genealogies and inheritance between different generations. Legacy and genealogy are interrogated either thematically as “literal or symbolic familial relationships” or textually, as “a conscious or unconscious, emulative or subversive, rewriting of earlier literary or critical texts” (9-10).

A similar approach has been applied specifically to the Italian context. Bernadette Luciano (2004) takes the cue from feminists' claim that women have to reconstruct a female genealogy and she develops a comparative analysis of three generations of Italian women writers in which the continuum of women's discourse emerges (127). Especially when they cross boundaries of genres, women writers maintain a dialogue or a debate with a literary mother “at time reflecting [them]sel[ves] in her image, at times resisting her, at times assisting her, always reinventing her” (102).

A very interesting application of Italian feminists' theories to literary critics is suggested by Stefania Lucamante's *A multitude of women (*2008). In her study of different generations of Italian women writers, Lucamante forges the concept of 'literary entrustment' as a new tool for inter-textual analysis. Lucamante's suggestive thesis is that there are different cases of literary entrustment among contemporary Italian women writers, which she illustrates by adopting the philosophical framework provided by the concept of *affidamento.* While entrustment in real life can create asymmetric, and sometimes hierarchical, relationships, literary entrustment between younger and the older writer does not, apart from their difference in age. Furthermore, literary entrustment does not require a particular acknowledgement on behalf of the younger author.

Describing the literary entrustment as the choice made by a younger woman writer to rewrite the text of an older one, Lucamante considers it “a privileged women's tradition from the twentieth century onward”, and a practice of the highest importance especially when it is extended to literary production, since “by entrusting previous literary female models with their own work, women writers facilitate the formation of a non-androcentric system of influence and reference in literature that pragmatically advances women's position in society” (29). In Lucamante's view a practice of literary entrustment between female writers of different generations can become an innovative force to open the canon of Italian literature: a phenomenon that, according to Rita Wilson, is already taking place, since women's writing “has invaded other literary spaces and challenged the restrictions of genres, exploring and experimenting the contaminations of languages and of different codes” (2000: 5). In my analysis of the novels by Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia I will occasionally refer to the concept of literary entrustment too.

In many ways the mother-daughter relationship is at the very foundation of women's writing,

especially when we consider it as a theme. A significant number of scholars analyse how motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship are represented in twentieth century Italian literature, through the theoretical discussion developed by feminists. For instance, Benedetti's study *The Tigress in the Snow, (*2007) focuses on "motherhood as a concrete experience in women's life, as reflected in and shaped by literature" (4) in twentieth century Italian women's writings. In her chronological survey, Benedetti identifies motherhood as a recurring theme whose depiction varies according to the demands of the historical moment. Initially presented as a woman's destiny and primary quality, in the last chapter motherhood is explored as a multitude of possibilities: an unnecessary experience to female fulfilment in life, a deep bond to a child or to another person without a biological component.

In spite of the variety of their approaches, scholars agree on one point: mothers are spoken to or talked about. They do not assume a speaking position. A very recent study of Italian women writers implicitly confirms Benedetti's statement. Sambuco's *Corporeal Bonds* (2012) illustrates once more the difficulties for women writers to allow maternal subjectivity. Sambuco traces "a journey that depicts the attempts of the daughter-narrator to define a female self that is outside the constriction of patriarchal society" (7). Significantly, the study explores the *daughter-mother* relationship in a group of female-authored novels written in Italian during the second half of the twentieth century. In all the texts, the mother-daughter bond is seen exclusively, or almost exclusively, from the point of view of the daughter.

As Giorgio (2002), Benedetti and Sambuco maintain, in spite of the vast corpus of daughters' narratives, very few are narratives assuming a maternal point of view in relation to an adult daughter: "Women writers have described this balancing act [between self and other] extensively from the daughter's point of view, but they are still reticent in relating it from the point of view of the mothers of daughters. " (Giorgio, 2002: 33).

Writing about the dialogue with the mothers in twenti-first century, Bernadette Luciano maintains that:

> In the past twenty years Italian feminists have theorized the need for women to (re)discover and/or (re)create their history in search of a female genealogy. This need has inspired many contemporary women authors to write about female experiences and to explore and construct their identities, often foregrounding the relationship with the maternal, both biological and symbolic. (102).

According to scholars and literary critics, a shift in the power balance between the mother's and

daughter's standpoint in narratives is still needed. So far, literary criticism has interrogated the mother-daughter relationship and traced its evolution, but the process has not come to a condition of equilibrium and the daughter's voice is perceived as prevailing. In the narratives analysed by Giorgio, Benedetti and Sambuco women writers hesitate to abandon their daughter-centricity and to speak as mothers of adult daughters. Giorgio and Sambuco analyse novels written between the 1980s and 1990s, while the texts studied by Benedetti span the whole twentieth century. Nevertheless, they all come to the same conclusion about maternal subjectivity.

Against this background, *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Oltre Babilonia*, *Lo Spazio Bianco*, and *Accabadora* suggest that a significant shift has occurred. This change becomes particularly evident if compared with the works produced by women writers during the 1980 and 1990s. Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia depart from the dysfunctional mode of relationship between mother and daughter that characterises those novels, and release from their narratives "the ghost still haunting contemporary women's narratives", as Paola Splendore calls the representation of the patriarchal mother found in women writers (210).

In the selected novels, mothers speak of and to adult daughters. The "haunting ghost" starts fading away, while maternal authority is gained and bestowed across generations. Moreover, through these novels a female genealogy comes to the fore. Composed by both biological and elective mother-daughter relationships, and based on dialogue between different generations of women, this genealogy of women leads to an unprecedented representation of the mother as subject and as the co-protagonist of the narration beside her daughter. Has the maternal 'ghost' finally waned? I argue that it has certainly begun to fade away, as I demonstrate in the following chapters.

3. Motherhood, daughters and female identity in Italian women writers: from Sibilla Aleramo onwards

From the very beginning of the last century, female-authored texts have variously explored the maternal relationship. Throughout these texts, it is possible to trace how the representation of female identity has gradually evolved. A recurrent aspect of these writings is that they consider motherhood as "a woman's primary quality" (Benedetti: 22) and, therefore, they portray women mainly as mothers.

Since notions of a woman's role and identity have usually been handed down from mother to daughter, the mother-daughter bond becomes crucial too in the formation of a woman's identity. In fact, in a patriarchal context daughters had little choice but to follow their mothers' path and model, even when the mother figure was far from attractive. However, there is a moment when the daughter begins to question her maternal legacy and, in searching for a different model, discovers

that she cannot identify with either her father or her mother. In the Italian context this moment is when Sibilla Aleramo published her autobiographical novel *Una Donna* (A Woman) in 1906. Following Aleramo's momentous novel, in Italian women writers' literary production not only does the mother-daughter dyad represent a recurring topic, but it is also frequently perceived as a crucial and sorrowful aspect of the female experience.

3.1. The foremothers and the 'unbroken chain'

Aleramo is one of the first women writers to question the prevailing social order. *Una Donna* is a lucid account of the author's search for an alternative to the only roles allotted to women: marriage and motherhood, the latter depicted as a monstrous chain of enslavement ("una mostruosa catena di servitù" 144). The protagonist sees in her mother a problematic embodiment of that passive femininity with which she is at odds. Although she is trying hard to reject that damaging interpretation of femininity, the protagonist feels forced to align herself with it because of her destiny as a woman. When Aleramo's narrator ceases identifying with her father and looks for a different model in her mother, she is profoundly disappointed by what her mother has to offer:

> La sua debolezza, la sua rinuncia alla lotta mi esacerbavano tanto più in quanto ero costretta a riconoscermi ora dei punti di contatto con lei nella mia rassegnazione al destino (39).

As Ursula Fanning (2002) states, it is the protagonist's fear of replicating her mother's weakness and refusal to fight that gives her the strength to make the radical decision to abandon her husband and child. A hard decision, but the only one that enables her to forge a new identity and a new destiny for herself. For this reason, the mother works as an anti-model to her daughter, who finds the determination to defy social conventions and laws for fear of following the same path of despair and madness as her mother. Fanning continues that it is the mother

> who, unwittingly furnishes the daughter with the will to leave her unbearable marriage [...] she acts on behalf of her mother as well as herself. It is the mother who has provided the constant template against which she measures and remodels herself (256).

In one of the most dramatic and meaningful passages of *Una Donna*, the protagonist discovers an unsent letter written many years earlier by her mother. In the letter the mother expresses the same hopelessness and isolation the daughter experiences in her own life:

> Debbo partire [...] Qui impazzisco [...] Lui non mi ama più [...] Ed io soffro tanto che

> non so più voler bene ai bambini. Debbo andarmene, andarmene [...] Poveri figli miei, forse è meglio per loro (144).

The daughter wishes she had been able to give her mother support and encouragement, but the dialogue takes place only in her imagination, despite her wishes for it to be otherwise:

> Avessi potuto sorprenderla, in quella notte, sentire, dalla sua bocca, la domanda: "che devo fare, figlia mia?" e rispondere anche a nome dei fratelli: "Va', mamma, va?!" Sì, questo le avrei risposto; le avrei detto: "Ubbidisci al comando della tua coscienza, rispetta sopra tutto la tua dignità, madre: sii forte, resisti lontana, nella vita, lavorando, lottando [...] risparmiaci lo spettacolo della tua lenta disfatta qui, di questa agonia che senti inevitabile! (144).

The silence, which tore mother and daughter apart, condemn each to a solitary struggle. When the protagonist decides to leave her family and finds the courage to defy social conventions, she is alone. Her defeated, silenced and dead mother cannot provide any support.

Having experienced the unbearable weight of maternal enslavement as a legacy received from her mother, Sibilla Aleramo (1906) wonders why mothers and daughters do not interrupt this transmission, why women embrace and even laud such a degree of self-sacrifice when experiencing motherhood: "Perché nella maternità adoriamo il sacrifizio?" (144). More often than not, the annihilation of the woman's previous identity with the advent of motherhood - something that Aleramo defines as a holocaust (1906: 144) - occurs against her will, notwithstanding her efforts.

Post-unification Italy is the context in which Aleramo's autobiography is grounded. It coincides, approximately, with the first women's emancipation movement, which fought for women's suffrage and political rights. The climate of revolt created by this early feminist movement pushed women writers to investigate their own position, as women, within the Italian society of their time. Some began to denounce the impossibility of combining their personal ambitions and desires with those they were expected to hold. In the process, some of them questioned their mothers' role, insofar as, "it is the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations" (Rich: 243). Mothers began to be held responsible for their daughters' difficulties.

This emancipation movement has been retrospectively called first-wave feminism after the term 'second-wave feminism' began to be used to describe a newer feminist movement (1960s – 1980s), more concerned with social and cultural inequalities. In Italy this first-wave feminism was, to some extent, fragmented and disjointed, due to the power of the catholic Church and the lack of a strong lay intellectual class. The reception of Aleramo's novel among women intellectuals clearly reveals

these limits of Italian feminism. Despite its immediate success in France, Germany, and Great Britain, the reactions elicited by *Una Donna* in Italy prove that Aleramo's stance was too radical for Italian female bourgeoisie. While several critics recognised the modernity of the book, renowned women intellectuals like Ersilia Majno and Adelaide Bernardini accused Aleramo of egoism and 'unwomanliness' for having betrayed her maternal duties. Majno, an activist in the women's movement and founder of the Unione Femminile in 1899, took Aleramo by surprise when, harshly rejecting her stance, asserted the glorification of the mother at the expense of the woman. Following Aleramo's courageous challenge to motherhood as an oppressive institution, many years were to pass before women could be allowed an independent role outside their biological and reproductive function.

In the wake of *Una Donna*'s controversial outcome, other writers engaged with the same themes. Most of their works reveal a clear intention to denounce the unfair burden stifling women's ambitions and lives once they become mothers.[9] In *I Divoratori* (The Devourers, 1911), Annie Vivanti endorses Aleramo's notion of motherhood as a woman's self-annihilation through the story of three generations of women. The 'devourers' mentioned in the title are the children, who unfailingly devour their mothers' talent and existence in an uninterrupted sequence that covers three generations of mothers and daughters. Although sympathising with the mothers, Vivanti fails to offer any escape to her characters, who seem both doomed and resigned to repeat the same gloomy destiny until a male child is eventually born.

Written during WWII and published in the immediate aftermath of the war, Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (1947) is the biography of a woman who manages to interrupt the mother-daughter chain of self-annihilation, but the price she pays is high. Banti's novel offers the most convincing proof of the negativity of the maternal role, since her heroine, Artemisia, achieves full recognition as an artist precisely because she is lacking in maternal roots and models, and identifies exclusively with her father. However, her successful career as a painter in a male-dominated profession is countered by her isolation and by her failure as a mother herself. In spite of her efforts, Artemisia's daughter despises her and shows no sign of warmth towards her mother.

The mutually exclusive choices of creativity and procreativity for a woman are a dilemma that is well-known to philosophers and women intellectuals of the time, as Aleramo's novel had

9 A few isolated examples, such as Goliarda Sapienza's *L'Arte della Gioia*, radically challenged the traditional maternal model which entails female abnegation. Other (and more successful) writers, such as Elsa Morante, less concerned with the political implication of women's position within Italian society, produced either gloomy representations of unloving maternal figures or examples of idealised and almost stereotypical mother-child relationships characterised by an attitude of uncompromising maternal sacrifice. The former type of mother (the unloving one) is always mother of a daughter, as in *Menzogna e Sortilegio* (House of Liars, 1948) while the latter is generally the mother of a male child as in *La Storia* (History, 1974) and *Menzogna e Sortilegio*.

demonstrated a few decades earlier. In these same years Simone de Beauvoir (1949) contended that in a male-centred culture women are excluded from both artistic creativity and the symbolic order. The French writer lays the foundations of a new season of feminist claims. Her best known work, *The Second Sex* (1949), published before the outburst of second-wave feminism, provides an explanation of how androcentric and patriarchal societies purposely construct female inferiority by considering institutionalised motherhood and gender stereotypes as a law of nature. Resorting to anthropology, biology, and social history, de Beauvoir challenges the notion of Woman as the Other, on which patriarchal cultures build women's exclusion from subjectivity. De Beauvoir's elaborations deeply influenced the thought of theorists for the following two decades, while her claims are mirrored in the work of many women writers.

Although her literary production span several decades, Fausta Cialente belongs to the generation of foremothers too. Her novel *Le Quattro Ragazze Wieselberger* (The Four Wieselberger Girls, 1976) focuses on three generations of women and how the annihilation of the woman at the hands of the mother is handed down from one generation to the next. A close friend of Aleramo, Cialente also questions the traditional roles of mother and wife in other works, such as *Ballata Levantina* (Levantine Ballad 1961) and *Un Inverno Freddissimo* (A Very Cold Winter 1966).[10] In these narratives, the writer supports the struggle for women's emancipation and shows an acute awareness of women's need for a productive role outside the home. Like Aleramo, Cialente expresses condemnation and pity in equal measure for women who

> will never learn that it is not worth-while to suffer so much, not even for the children's sake, and who, in spite of their own wretched experience, will educate their own children -and especially their daughters - to renunciation and sacrifice (Wood 115-6).

In *Dalla Parte di Lei* (The Best of Husbands, 1949) and *Quaderno Proibito* (The Secret Diary 1952) Alba De Cèspedes offers a clear-sighted vision of female alienation and marginalisation within society. In post-war Italy, escape is not an available option for these middle-class heroines who are legally denied both the possibilities of divorce and extra-conjugal love affairs. According to the Italian laws in force at that time and abolished only in the 1970s, adultery committed by women was considered a more serious crime than adultery committed by men. Women were more liable to be punished for it, in spite of the new Constitution, which guaranteed equal rights to women and men. Despite significant advances made by women towards emancipations after the war, women's

10 An interesting analysis of the protagonist's role as a mother and as a woman in *Un Inverno Freddissimo* is provided by Donatella Alesi in her Essay “Non Nuove ma Diverse: le Donne Italiane del Dopoguerra secondo Fausta Cialente” (2007).

rights were still mostly defined in terms of maternity. In fact, the ideology of women as primarily reproducers rather than producers was still dominant in the majority of political parties and in the society of the time.[11]

The most terrifying representation of motherhood and the mother-daughter bond under patriarchy is, arguably, the one portrayed by Elsa Morante. Her first novel, *Menzogna e Sortilegio*, (House of Liars, 1947) presents a multitude of unhappy, frustrated women who turn into bitter and monstrous mothers of daughters. As Farnetti observes, Morante stages "una terribile storia di non amore" (2008: 147-8). Unlike the writers previously mentioned, Morante is not concerned with women's emancipation. The gruesome mothers she represents are not intent on denouncing an unfair order. On the contrary, Morante openly opposes feminist claims and rejects the idea that "women, as individuals, have intrinsic dignity and value, apart from any function that they may or may not perform for society, and apart from their relationship to men" (Benedetti, 80). Due to her position, it is not a coincidence that when Morante represents loving mothers, those mothers are invariably mothers of sons and are ready to annihilate themselves for the sake of a (male) child.

Despite their efforts, (with the significant exception of Morante's characters) female characters portrayed in these novels only manage to shake the monstrous chain of maternal enslavement, without breaking it. For a long time motherhood, in all its variations (denied, accepted, exalted, imposed, rejected, glorified) remains the life-defining event in a woman's life, the yardstick of her success, her only chance to be socially recognised, and her prison. If to be a mother within wedlock is the only identity available to women, to fail in this goal, is to fail as a human being. This depiction of woman as mother proved to be quite an unattractive perspective for daughters.

Only in the 1970s did feminist theorists and women writers, both in Italy and abroad, engage thoroughly with the questions raised by Aleramo at the beginning of the century. In 1976, for instance, Rich makes a statement that turns the solitary claim made by Aleramo into a broadly shared vindication:

> As daughters, we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours. We need not to be vessels of another woman's self-denial and frustration. The quality of the mother's life is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist (247).

While Aleramo's nameless protagonist is a woman who, borrowing Rich's words, "can believe in

11 See: Cutrufelli, Maria Rosa et al. *Il Novecento delle Italiane. Una Storia Ancora da Raccontare.* Editori Riuniti, Roma: 2001; Chiara Valentini, *Le Donne Fanno Paura.* Il Saggiatore, Milano: 1997.

herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her", the model she embodies is a strident exception, especially in relation to the mother-daughter bond. In fact, weak or absent mothers and dysfunctional mother-daughter dynamics characterise a wide range of Italian women writings published during the first half of the century, and for a few decades after.

3.2. Literary mothers and the fight over the female body

The feminist movement which developed after WWII, generally known as 'second wave' feminism, took up the task begun by the first wave. Once the battle for political rights was won, the feminist claim started targeting civil, cultural and social issues. During the 1970s and 1980s feminists achieved remarkable improvements both in legislation and in terms of women's role in society. In Italy divorce became legal (1970), a new family law granted equal rights to wife and husband (1975), and the legalisation of abortion and contraception assured women a wider control over their reproductive function. Muraro summarises women's advancements within Italian society during the 1970s:

> Noi siamo quelle che hanno lasciato il paese per andare in città, che hanno litigato con padri e fratelli maneschi, talvolta difese talvolta non difese da madri che non ci capivano, noi abbiamo smesso di andare in chiesa la domenica ad ascoltare prediche sessuofobe e misogine, noi ci siamo rifiutate di servire i maschi di casa, noi abbiamo fatto 'l'amore libero', […] abbiamo dato un'educazione sessuale ai figli, alle figlie, ai mariti, […] abbiamo divorziato e abbiamo spiegato perché alle figlie e ai figli (1995: 120-1).

The struggles of Italian women described by Muraro are reflected in the literary production of the time. Published during the 1970s and early 1980s, the novels included in this section locate themselves within the chronological boundaries of second-wave feminism. As for the content, they deal overtly with the difficulty of combining motherhood and freedom, with relation to the construction of female identity. The experience of being a mother is no more an inescapable fate. Rejecting the idea of motherhood as a patriarchal institution, these authors claim that motherhood has to be a woman's choice: not only the choice whether to be a mother or not (which implies control over their bodies), but also the chosen conditions of their motherhood (which implies control over their lives). In search for a different model of female freedom, these writers move beyond Aleramo's dilemma - that is, the binary choice between motherhood and self-fulfilment - while struggling to be mothers without giving up their selves.

As Italian society experienced many deep changes, especially in relation to women's lives, women writers registered this shift and started investigating motherhood with a different consciousness of female subjectivity. Their texts reflected and sometimes anticipated contemporary public debates. Writing from a woman's point of view, these authors reflected the different positions held in the political arena on abortion, female sexuality and motherhood as a woman's choice.

Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un Bambino Mai Nato,* (Letter to an Unborn Child, 1975) is a short novel in which the author addresses the issue of motherhood as a choice rather than a consequence of biological functions. She builds a complex argument about the place of maternity in the life of a woman and explores the motivation of her protagonist's refusal to be defined in terms of her reproductive powers. Setting out from the notion of freedom,

> the book is a visceral, heartfelt meditation on the terrible responsibility of bringing a human being into the world [...] Perhaps no other Italian writer has investigated in such detail pregnancy as an event that challenges a woman's notion of self-hood, while giving her a privileged perspective on the most crucial issues in human life (Benedetti, 91-2).

Fallaci is only one among many. In her multiform literary production, Dacia Maraini engaged with the topic of women's freedom of choice on different occasions, in works belonging to different periods and genres. *Il Treno per Helsinki* (The Train to Helsinki, 1984) is not primarily focused on woman's role in contemporary society. Nevertheless, the way the writer deals with the themes of women's freedom, motherhood and the definition of female identity deserves attention. The novel is set at the end of the 1960s. A young woman, Armida, and her circle of friends reject the traditional idea of love and marriage and strive to create a different ethos for couples. On the backcloth of this merry-go-round of unrequited loves leading to a general unhappiness, Armida falls pregnant and struggles to keep her unborn baby alive. Due to some complications arising in her pregnancy, she is gradually turned into a still, motionless body completely wired up to machines. In the name of motherhood, she is no longer the young intellectual she had been, but becomes the body that carries the new life, brutally reduced to her biological and reproductive function.

In *Donna in Guerra* (Woman at War, 1975), Maraini eloquently expresses those feelings of alienation and loss of subjectivity experienced by women of that time, especially within marriage. The protagonist is a young woman, Vannina. Although she is able to support herself with her work, she is subordinated to the needs of her husband. When he realises that Vannina wants to leave him, he makes her pregnant against her will. In spite of her husband's plans, Vannina decides to have an abortion and to begin a new life. Once she realises that “the woman's body is the terrain on which

patriarchy is erected" (Rich, 55), Vannina escapes this fate. Years later, Maraini tackles the same topic in a theoretical essay, *Un Clandestino a Bordo* (A Clandestine on Board, 1996), a reconsideration of women's position and rights in society.

Another example of Maraini's enduring interest in women's lives is *La Lunga Vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (The Silent Duchess, 1990), Maraini's best known novel. In this work, Maraini drew inspiration from the story of one of her ancestors. The protagonist is a noble woman, Marianna, who is raped by an uncle at the age of five. As a consequence, the child becomes deaf-mute. Marianna is an uncommon female figure in the landscape of Italian literature. In spite of her disability, or maybe precisely because of it, she assesses her right to pleasure and formulates an uncommon demand for identity and subjectivity. The story recalls some aspects of Aleramo's autobiographical account. Both texts depict the way in which the daughter's ambivalent feelings towards the mother intertwine with "the attempts of their respective protagonists to find and define themselves" (Fanning: 249). Like Aleramo's protagonist, when Marianna reaches maturity, she rejects the image of motherhood as sacrifice, based on self-annihilation and loss of self. In this novel Maraini engages with an issue of the greatest poignancy at that time. *The Silent Duchess* suggests how women can "emerge from silence and create their own cultural spaces within the dominant patriarchy" (Fanning: 249).

Other works produced in this timeframe deal with the subject-matter of motherhood and freedom, for instance Lidia Ravera's *Bambino Mio* (Child of Mine, 1979). However, in these same years, the interest of a significant number of Italian women writers begins to shift their focus from motherhood towards the mother-daughter relationship, as I show in the following section.

3.3. The fascination of the mother: the daughter-mother relationship in Italian female authored narratives during the 1980s and 1990s.

During the 1980s, Italian women writers felt an urge to engage with the mother-daughter relationship as an essential, unresolved tie in the conquest of female identity and subjectivity. This drive led to the production of narratives dominated by daughters in search of their mothers and by maternal figures who are depicted as distant, absent, indifferent, sometimes hostile to their daughters. In a short period of time women writers produced a large number of texts that followed the same narrative pattern as that of a daughter recalling her mother's life after her death, in order to find her own identity[12]. Compared to the works examined in the previous section, the perspective

12 In the same years of the blossoming of women's narratives on the mother-daughter bond, Elsa Morante goes against the tide and writes the story of a mother-child dyad narrated by the son after the mother's death. Her last novel, *Aracoeli* (1982), is the account of an obsessive love for the mother on behalf of her son. As *La Storia*, again the mother-son dyad is the only way Morante represents maternal love. Compared to the blossoming of a remarkable number of narratives dedicated to the mother-daughter relationship and focused on the daughter's point of view, Morante's is a singular voice and confirms her extraneousness to feminist claims and women's struggles.

here is completely subverted. While Fallaci, Maraini, Ravera and others portrayed women who speak as potential mothers or mothers-to-be, here the mother is spoken to by the daughter. In the novels discussed in this section, women's subjectivity emerges exclusively as a daughter's subject position. Women writers' urgency to engage with the mother-daughter relationship from a daughterly point of view coincides, from a chronological perspective, with the feminist re-evaluation of the daughter's primary relationship with the mother. Furthermore, their narratives put great emphasis on gender.

At the beginning, the rediscovery of the maternal assumes the feature of the daughter's 'fascination' regarding the mother. This feature characterises women's narratives and feminist theories at large, both in Anglo-American and in European areas, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter. In the Italian context, the predominance of the daughter's point of view is somehow consequential to the feminist practice of "taking herself as a starting point" ("la pratica del partire da sé"). The writers mentioned in this section engage with a similar process. The outcome is the production of "autobiographical narratives in which a daughter reconstructs her mother's life and, in the process, comes to term with her own identity" (Giorgio, 2002: 189).

A large group of writers lay a definite stress on the relationship between mother and daughter: Francesca Sanvitale's *Madre e Figlia* (Mother and Daughter, 1980), Fabrizia Ramondino's *Althénopis* (1981), Carla Cerati's *La Cattiva Figlia* (The Bad Daughter,1990), Elena Ferrante's *L'Amore Molesto* (A Disturbing Love, 1992), Mariateresa Di Lascia's *Passaggio in Ombra* (Passage in the Dark, 1995), as well as Francesca Duranti's *La Bambina* (The Girl, 1976), Edith Bruck's *Lettera alla Madre* (Letter to Mother, 1988), Helena Janeczek's *Lezioni di Tenebra* (Lessons of Darkness, 1997), Elena Stancanelli's *Benzina* (Fuel, 1998), Clara Sereni's *Il Gioco dei Regni* (The Game of Kingdoms, 1993), Marlisa Trombetta'S *La Mamma Cattiva* (The Bad Mother, 2001) and Donatella Di Pietrantonio's *Mia Madre è un Fiume* (My Mother is a River, 2011).

All these novels share a common plot: a (more often than not) bad or absent mother portrayed through the gaze of her (more often than not) unloved daughter after the mother's death or when the mother is terminally ill and no more able to be a real interlocutor with the daughter. In Sanvitale's novel, *Madre e Figlia*, the centrality of the mother-daughter dyad is evidenced by the title itself, which, according to Sharon Wood, "suggests both multiplicity (a mother and a daughter) and an internal split (the character of the daughter Sonia, figure for Sanvitale herself, as both mother and daughter)" (238). The account, structured as a labyrinth, begins when most of its main characters are already dead. The narration summons the life of mother and daughter narrated by the daughter, Sonia, whose voice interweaves with the voice of an unspecified and omniscient narrator.

In Sonia's narration, temporal planes are continually twisted, "intrecciati non dall'ordine della

vita ma dai meandri della memoria e della verità" (16). Her fragmented memories create a collage of both the mother's and the daughter's lives. The outcome is a narration that constantly oscillates between dream and reality, fantasies and desires. As Sambuco observes,

> The coherent, chronological narrative structure is disrupted. The manipulation of the time sequence through juxtaposition enables a process of psychological association that reveals, or rather allows to surface from the narrative, the aspects of the narrator's life that are not apparent to herself (2012: 76-7).

The daughters' attitude toward the maternal body exemplifies the concept of fascination for the mother, in that Sonia's attitude is a mixture of hatred, envy and desire for the mother's body. In search of her own identity, the daughter tries to come to terms with her mother, with the maternal body, with their past, and with the load of unexpressed feelings that characterise the daughter's relationship with her mother.

Ramondino's novel, *Althenopis,* also hinges on a mother-daughter relationship whose story is narrated by the adult daughter. As in *Madre e Figlia*, here, too, the author combines two modes of narration, so that the first-person account of the previous two parts becomes a third person, impersonal narrator in the final part. This choice enhances the change in perspective about the events narrated, the third person allowing a distant gaze which does not belong to the previous parts of the novel. The protagonist of *Althénopis* alternates identification with and rejection of the model embodied by her mother. As she approaches adolescence, she feels threatened by gendered oppressive role models to which she is expected to conform as the daughter of a Southern bourgeois family. As an adult woman, she moves to the north, far from her native town, where she discovers and embraces a different model of adulthood, which is gender-neutral. Based on money making and career, this new model seems to work for a while. When the protagonist reaches her maturity, she realises that she is dissatisfied with that model too. Therefore, after refusing to replicate her mother's destiny, she rejects also the alternative model she had found far from her mother and begins a journey that drives her back towards the mother and the maternal. The final pages of the novel, in fact, hint at an unexpected mother-daughter rapprochement. It can be argued that, in Ramondino's novel,

> the reaffirmation of the relationship with the mother and her insertion into a specifically female genealogy offers a symbolic and psychic structure from within which the narrator can reshape her own sexual identity (Wood 253).

In the 1990s, women writers are still grappling with the complexities of the maternal bond. Mothers are depicted through the eyes and words of the daughters, who, in turn, keep struggling with a maternal ghost. In the representation of these mother-daughter conflictual (and conflicted) relationships, some structural, technical and thematic aspects emerge as recurrent features: the importance of the female body and its biological functions, the re-visitation of family memories as a first step toward a reconstruction of a female genealogy, and the adoption of a multi-focal narration combined with a non-chronological rendition of the events.

For instance, Carla Cerati's *La Cattiva Figlia* stages another mother-daughter dysfunctional relationship. The plot is built on the protagonist's uncomfortable dilemma. Giulia, the daughter, experiences the clash between an urge to play a supportive daughterly role and her aversion towards her mother. When the mother, in need of care, has to move in with the daughter, Giulia starts interrogating the old woman about their common past, which is revisited through a double perspective. The voices of mother and daughter interweave, but as in Sanvitale's and Ramondino's novels, here, too, the narration privileges the daughter's point of view, presenting the reader with a daughter who engages in the task of reconstructing her mother's (and her own) life, when the mother is about to die. It is worth mentioning here also a partially autobiographical text written by Maraini, *La Nave per Kobe* (The Ship to Kobe, 2001), in which the author engages with a very topical task for women writers of this generation, that is, the narration of her mother's story. Drawing inspiration from her mother's diaries, which she fortuitously recovers after her mother's death, the author reconstructs her mother's youth and her own childhood in Japan, immediately before and during WWII.

Particularly significant to this theme is the literary production of Elena Ferrante. Her novels deal with the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship explored from at least two different perspectives. In her first two novels, *L'Amore Molesto* (Harassing Love, 1992) and *I Giorni dell'Abbandono* (The Days of the Abandonment, 2002), the author assumes the viewpoint of an adult woman who, as a daughter, interrogates the secret connections between her own unresolved identity and the troubled relationship with her dead mother. Both the protagonists are women in their early forties, haunted by the ghost of their maternal legacy and trying to come to terms with this uncomfortable memory. In both cases we deal with what Felski (1989) defines as “novel of self discovery” (83), characteristic of many feminist narratives of emancipation. In these two novels the daughters are as steeped in the contradictory attitude of adoration of and resentment for the mother, as in the novels authored by Ramondino and Sanvitale.

In all the above mentioned works the mother is, without exception, the object, and not subject, of the narration. The “daughter-centricity” has not been challenged. More recently, Ferrante engages

with the mother as a subject. *La Figlia Oscura* (The Lost Daughter, 2006) deals with the twofold topic of being and having a mother. The protagonist, Leda, a middle-aged, divorced mother of two teenage daughters and a professor of English literature, speaks of herself as a daughter and as a mother at the same time. Despite her current identity as an emancipated woman, as a mother she is weak, unloved and frustrated, while as a daughter she is helplessly haunted by her mother's bequest to her. The patriarchal notion of self-sacrificial maternal love, created out of male-centricity, women's oppression and wretchedness, shapes her relationship to her daughters and to the occasional "figlia oscura"[13] she meets during a vacation. While struggling to keep both her identities as a mother and as a daughter, Leda deals with her shadowy and discomforting secrets: her unhappy childhood, the dysfunctional relationship with her own mother, her desperation and failure as a mother herself and as a partner. She tries to break through the maternal model, but she does not go far enough, and, unwittingly, she hands this message down on her daughters.

In *La Figlia Oscura* the representation of motherhood is enriched by a new aspect, since the protagonist tries to experience elective motherhood when she develops a temporary maternal relationship with the young Nina. However, Ferrante's narrative is still stuck in a condition of "maternal abjection" (Kristeva 1980). She is unable to move further, as if "nobody has told her how far there is to go" (Rich, 248). In spite of all her efforts Leda is still affected by a patriarchal mother and is a partially patriarchal mother herself. As a consequence, both her biological daughters and her "adopted" daughter reject her and the model she offers. Unlike *L'Arte della Gioia*, with its joyful celebration of life and of the power of giving life, *La Figlia Oscura* is a representation of problematic motherhood and of dysfunctional mother-daughter bonds.

In Ferrante's narratives there is no place for the mother as a powerful, benevolent figure who gains subjectivity in relation to her daughter. The presence of a benevolent, supportive maternal figure, therefore, is what makes the novels of Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia strikingly original. Their non-conformity to the recurrent representation of the maternal model is evident when compared with the prolific production of other women writers who, during the 1990s, 2000s and even 2010s keep tackling the mother-daughter relationship in a way that fails to disrupt the established tradition of patriarchal mothers, steeped in maternal abjection and unable to break the mould. Even when, as in the case of *La Figlia Oscura*, the mother speaks as subject, she is defeated and unable to communicate with her daughters.

A paradoxical representation of the impossibility to represent and give voice to a powerful and benign mother who can pass her strength on to her daughter is provided by Elena Stancanelli's

13 The English translation of the title is slightly different from the original. The literal translation of the Italian title would be: 'The Dark Daughter.

novel *Benzina*. The three protagonists, a mother, a daughter and the daughter's lesbian lover, correspond to the three speaking voices. The mother epitomises perfectly the patriarchal, unloving, distant mother, until she is killed by her daughter's lover. From this moment on, her true self, disengaged from her corpse, assumes a benevolent gaze on the daughter and a protective and encouraging attitude that she never had in life. As the mother distances her self from her body and her old self, she becomes increasingly closer to her daughter, unbeknown to the daughter herself. The mother becomes aware of her subjection to an unfair order and rejects it only after her death, that is, only when she is no longer able to communicate with her daughter and they no longer belong to the same world.

A very recent novel devoted to the well-established literary tradition of the mother-daughter plot is Donatella di Pietrantonio's first novel, *Mia Madre è Un fiume* (My Mother is a River, 2011). The novel hinges on the centrality of a daughter-narrator and validates the trope of the mother-daughter dysfunctional bond of love. Di Pietrantonio retraces the well-trodden path of the unloved daughter talking to a mother who is no longer able to listen to and to converse with her daughter. It presents a female narrator, who recounts the story of her mother Esperina and of the other women of her family. Affected by dementia, the old woman has forgotten large parts of her past and now is both object and interlocutor of her daughter's discourse. Carried out in the second person, the daughter's narration addresses the mother but also the daughter herself, and re-ties a dialogue that was broken at the very beginning of their relationship. However, due to the mother's condition, it never becomes an actual dialogue.

As in many novels mentioned in this section, in *Mia Madre è un Fiume* the daughter rediscovers her bond with her mother when it is (almost) too late, while undertaking the task of redesigning their bond. Thirty years after the publication of *Madre e Figlia*, Di Pietrantonio inscribes herself within the same literary tradition initiated by Sanvitale. The ambivalence of the daughter's feelings (a mixture of attachment and resentment, passion and blame) are evident from the very beginning, as the daughter-narrator observes: “Il nostro amore è andato storto, da subito” (25). The mother is distant, or, when close, not close in the appropriate way. The maternal behaviour, characterised by “la consumata esperienza nell'essere insieme invadente e lontana” (42) is always painfully disappointing for the daughter. The mother has not been a good mother and is perceived as, “la mezza madre che poi è stata” (37). Ambiguous feelings of love and resentment emerge throughout the duration of the narration:

> Mi appassionano le vie oscure dove il cronico desiderio di mamma si è disperso e cambiato nel suo contrario (28).

> I conti non si chiudono mai tra me e lei [...] Tutta la vita l'ho cercata. Ancora la cerco. Non la trovo (37).

The novel by Di Pietrantonio does not disrupt the canonical representation of the mother-daughter conflicted bond, but is extremely interesting because, by facing the same dilemmas, it confirms the existence and the vitality of a (female) literary *topos* of the mother-daughter bond, as well as the difficulty, within that tradition, to allow mother and daughter a mutual, reciprocal gaze through which they recognise each other as equals.

As Giorgio states,

> [women writers] appear to be reluctant to abandon their position as daughters and speak as mothers of adult daughters. If it has taken Italian women centuries to start articulating representations of the mother/daughter relationship and to move beyond the deadlock of maternal idealization and denigration, it will probably take them a few more years to start writing about their daughters (2002: 150).

The mother-daughter dyads analysed in this section have a common characteristic: all of them display a mother who is absent, or they deal with an unsatisfied desire for the mother. This situation gradually evolves. The gap separating a dead or distant mother from her adult daughter in search of maternal love starts to close in.

Although in the last few decades women writers have explored mother-daughter relationships and motherhood mostly from a daughter's point of view, signs that something is changing are emerging. In some of these novels the daughter's viewpoint moves “from criticism to understanding, from estrangement to empathy, as a natural maturation and development” (Benedetti, 98), while the mother starts gaining a certain degree of subjectivity, as in Stancanelli's novel. In spite of the persistence of the centrality of the daughter's perspective in these narratives, it is possible to perceive how the expression of the mother's voice and her point of view begins to flow into the daughter's voice and gaze. The mother becomes gradually more attainable, or is herself subject of the narration, as in the novels I discuss in the next chapters.

CHAPTER 2.
Goliarda Sapienza and the art of deconstructing (and reconstructing) the mother-daughter bond.

"A woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create liveable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist."
(A. Rich: 247)

L'Arte della Gioia (The Art of Joy, 2008), regarded as Goliarda Sapienza's most important novel, represents a puzzling literary case in the Italian cultural arena. Written over nine years and completed in 1976, the book remained unpublished until the author's death in 1996. In 1998, a minor publishing house printed 1000 copies[1], but the book went completely unheeded. Then, in 2005, the German publisher Aufbau-Verlag and the French publisher Vivianne Hamy discovered the book and, despite its voluminosity and the consequent high translation costs[2], they decided to publish it[3]. The book enjoyed instant success: the French translation, *L'Art de la Joie,* sold 2000 copies on the first day, and a week later was reprinted, selling over 20 thousand copies.[4] Two years later, the novel was translated and published in Spanish and Catalan.[5] As a result of its positive reception abroad[6], Sapienza's novel finally gained full recognition and public acclaim in Italy as

1 G. Sapienza, *L'Arte della Gioia*, Stampa Alternativa, 1998. In 1994, when the author was still alive, a small edition of the first part of the book was published by the same publishing house.
2 A. Pellegrino, "La Lunga Marcia de *L'Arte della Gioia*," in *L'Arte della Gioia*, (2008), VI.
3 The French edition (*L'Art de la Joie*, trans. Natalie Castagné, Editions Vivianne Hamy, 2005) translates the original title literally. The German edition is organised in two volumes with two different titles: *In den Himmel Stürzen*, translated by Constanze Neumann, Aufbau Verlag GmbH, 2005, and *Die Signora*, translated by Esther Hansen, Aufbau Verlag GmbH, 2007). It is interesting to note that, in the German version, the title of the book is remarkably different from that of the original (the literal translation of the first volume's title is: A Fall into Heaven). The first English translation of the novel, *The Art of Joy*, (translated by Anne Milano Appel) has been recently released by Penguin in the UK and in the US in July 2013.
4 In D. Scarpa, "Senza Alterare Niente", in *L'Arte della Gioia*, 2008: 535.
5 G. Sapienza, *El Arte del Placer*, trans. José Ramòn Monreal, Lumen, 2007; G.Sapienza, *El Arte de viure*, trans. Anna Casassas, La Campana, 2007.
6 Maria Belen Hernandez Gonzalez retraces the troubled journey of the novel towards public acclaim in her essay "La Fortuna Letteraria de *L'Arte della Gioia* in Europa", (2012). Among the numerous enthusiastic reviews of the novel, I mention here two important French articles: René de Ceccatty, "Sapienza, princesse hérétique", published in *Le*

well, where it was published by Einaudi in 2008, that is, thirty years after its completion and a decade after its author's death.

What caused this delayed recognition? There were possibly several contributing factors. *L'Arte della Gioia* is a *bildungsroman*[7] that hinges on one of the most intriguing portrayals of a female character in Italian literature. Through its protagonist, the novel explores and challenges the limits that Italian society imposed on female's freedom during the first half of the twentieth century. While following the heroine's quest for joy and freedom from her early childhood until her seventies, the author "undoes" some of the tenets upon which Italian society is built, such as socially constructed gendered roles and heterosexual family paradigms based on blood connections. Furthermore, the anti-conformism of the protagonist transgresses well established codes of conduct and moral boundaries. This was quite an explosive mixture in the landscape of Italian society of its time. As Charlotte Ross (2012) argues, "it seems to be a novel that does not fit the moment of its composition" (1).

The deep link between biographical experience and writing has been seen as one of the reasons that makes Sapienza's writing "quite uncomfortable to read" (Ross, 2). This is especially true for *L'Arte della Gioia*, in spite of the fact that the novel is not overtly autobiographical. Both the difficult editorial trajectory of the novel and its unorthodox protagonist reflect the eccentric personality and life of Sapienza (1924-1996). As one of *L'Arte della Gioia* first reviewers foresaw, the main hindrance to the novel's success were "la personalité écrasante de l'auteur et la psycologie [...] de sa protagoniste" ("the overwhelming personality of the author and the psychological features of its protagonist", René de Ceccatty, 2005). Sapienza's mother, Maria Giudice, was a prominent historical figure of the Italian left and the first woman leader of a trade union, becoming *segretaria della camera del lavoro di Torino* (Providenti, 2010: 23-39). Her father, Giuseppe Sapienza, was a socialist lawyer and an antifascist activist. Goliarda was their only biological child in a broad extended family that included the numerous children Maria and Giuseppe had from previous relationships and whom Goliarda considered as her brothers and sisters. Goliarda (whose bizarre name was chosen by her anticlerical father, who did not want the name of a saint) grew up in Sicily,

Monde des Livres, 16 September 2005 and Catherine David, "L'Art de la Joie", published in *Nouvel Observateur*, 8 September 2005. After the publication of the Spanish translation, Sonia Hernandez wrote a very positive review in which she emphasises how the protagonist challenges social conventions in order to pursue her art of joy, S. Hernandez, Goliarda Sapienza, la Victoria del Placer, published in "Qué leer", n. 54, March 2007.

7 The definition of Bildungsroman for female-authored novels is controversial and has been debated by scholars. Taking the cue from Franco Moretti's study *Il Romanzo di Formazione* (1999 [1986]), Adriana Chemello (2007) contends that the structure of Bildungsroman is not appropriate to women's narratives in that women's trajectories are not characterised by the same degree of freedom as men's and these limits affects women's texts. Chemello formulates the notion of "romanzo del divenire" in that "la *bildung* femminile, anziché perfezionarsi e mettersi alla prova nello spazio sociale e nell'itinerario geografico del Grand Tour, si compie nell'*intus*, nell'acquisire consapevolezza di sé, della propria forza e della propria volontà. Un viaggio introspettivo[...] per divenire una persona consapevole, una ricerca interiore, un 'divenire donna'" (21).

in a highly unconventional environment. Her parents were unmarried. She was educated at home and did not, due to her parents' political views, attend the regular school which was under the influence of the Fascist regime. At the age of sixteen she won a scholarship to the Accademia di Arte Drammatica in Rome and proved to be a talented actress. During the occupation of Rome by the Nazists, she became a partisan. Her unstable mental condition and her cultural non-conformity, however, affected her life and her success. After two attempted suicides, Sapienza spent a considerable period of time in a psychiatric hospital where she was treated with what is now known as electroconvolsive therapy. Upon her decision to abandon the theatre and the cinema, Sapienza devoted herself entirely to writing, with mixed success.[8] Of her eight books, four have been published posthumously. Despite some recognition, and after some misfortunes, Sapienza died poor and alone at the age of 72. After her death, the author's personal story and work were neglected until very recent years.[9]

Sapienza's novel provides a wide-ranging reconstruction of the first seventy years of the twentieth century. Significantly, the protagonist was born on the first of January 1900. Not surprisingly, some critics have called this grand historical fresco "a new Gattopardo", noting that both novels, written by Sicilian authors and set in Sicily, were published posthumously. Due to the outstanding feature that *L'Arte della Gioia* has a woman as its protagonist, some critics have defined it as "la Gattoparda."[10]

Born in Sicily to a miserable family, against all odds Modesta manages to escape her fate of violence and humiliation. She spends her childhood with her biological mother and disabled sister in a degraded and poverty-stricken environment until her father suddenly reappears for just one day, producing an unexpected twist to the story. During his visit, the father rapes Modesta and disappears soon after, while a fire kills her mother and sister. At the age of nine, the orphaned Modesta is given hospitality in a convent, where the Mother Superior, Leonora, acts as a second

8 While her major novel *L'Arte della Gioia* was repeatedly rejected by publishers, other works found a better reception. Sapienza's first work, *Lettera Aperta* (1967), was appreciated by critics. Two years later she published another autobiographical text, *Il Filo di Mezzogiorno* (1969). After spending a few days in jail for theft, Sapienza wrote and published *L'Università di Rebibbia* (1983). The experience of conviction is at the centre of this short novel and later inspired *Le Certezze del Dubbio* (1987).

9 Only very recently has the unusual figure of Goliarda Sapienza experienced a kind of renaissance and begun to attract the interest of critics and academics at an international level. On the wake of *L'Arte della Gioia*'s successful reappearance, other unpublished works by Sapienza have been published. The last few years have witnessed an increasing number of studies, both in Italian and English, focusing on Sapienza's multifaceted activity as a writer. To name a few of the most significant: Giovanna Providenti' biography of Goliarda Sapienza *La Porta è Aperta*, (2010), Providenti's edited volume *"Quel Sogno d'Essere" di Goliarda Sapienza* (2012), Monica Farnetti's edited volume *Appassionata Sapienza* (2011) and Charlotte Ross' article "Goliarda Sapienza's Eccentric Interruptions" (2012).

10 See: Adele Cambria, "Goliarda Sapienza, la Terribile Arte della Gioia", published in *L'Unità*, 6 July 2009. In this article, the journalist, following the example of French critics, refers to the book as to a new "Gattopardo" and defines the character of Modesta as "una splendida creatura siciliana di sesso femminile: la nuova Gattoparda".

mother to her. At Leonora's death, the 17 year old Modesta moves to the Brandiforti's ancient villa, the home of Leonora's rich family. Here she finds her third mother figure in Leonora's mother, Gaia, and she also finds a friend, a lover and a sister in Beatrice, who is Leonora's biological (and illegitimate) daughter and Gaia's grand-daughter. Modesta soon earns for herself the right to remain in the house, by marrying Gaia's only son, Ippolito, a severely disabled man affected by Down's syndrome, but who is nevertheless the Prince. Therefore, when Gaia dies, Modesta, now the Principessa, becomes the head of the Brandiforti family, which she reshapes according to her own unconventional idea of kinship. She has two sons, Prando and Jacopo, born within her marriage but from different biological parents, and one adoptive daughter, Ida (also known as Bambolina or Bambù), who is the orphaned child of Beatrice and her husband Carlo. She has many female and male lovers: Beatrice; the family's bailiff, Carmine; the socialist doctor, Carlo; Carmine's son, Mattia; the antifascist, Joyce; the anarchist and Modesta's cell-mate, Nina; and Nina's friend, Marco. Other figures belong to her family without having socially recognisable roles: Stella, hired as Jacopo's wet-nurse and then considered as a sister by Modesta; Stella's sons 'Ntoni and Carlo; Mela, an orphan with no means of survival whom Modesta adopts remembering her own experiences as an orphan; Pietro, who is Ippolito's attendant; and Crispina, Pietro's little daughter.

As a historical backdrop to Modesta's personal history, there are two world wars, the rise and fall of Fascism and the difficult aftermath of the second world war. These events are recounted through the eyes of Modesta, who lucidly unmasks the crippling conformism affecting Italian culture, politics and society. Her deep involvement in the struggle against Fascism, however, does not prevent her from denouncing the conventional and limit-bound behaviour also characterising many antifascists, especially in relation to the role and condition of women.

An interesting aspect of the novel is the choice of the characters' names, some of which have a clear metaphoric meaning: Modesta, “modest”, reflects the protagonist's condition of birth which was very humble. Her mind however is not modest at all, as Gaia notices immediately. The old lady finds the name of Modesta at the same time horrible and inappropriate for the girl, the opposite of what Modesta, in fact, is: “[Gaia] dice che tu sei l'opposto del nome che porti” (75). Gaia's intuition is right: Modesta is ambitious and fully aware of her intelligence, which she will later prove. Gaia's name, too, is a meaningful one. The meaning of the old lady's name (gay, merry) is the opposite of her temperament, as Gaia herself dryly admits: “Ti pare che io mi debba chiamare Gaia? E che ho di gaio io!” (57). Gaia's name has a mythological origin and is more related to the role she plays in Modesta's story than it is with its literal meaning: Gaia bears the name of Mother Earth, that is, the symbol of female power, of fertility and prosperity. As the homonym deity, Gaia, too, represents an unprecedented female power for Modesta. As such, Gaia is the powerful ancestor that Modesta

chooses in order to create her female genealogy. It is from her third mother that Modesta draws legitimacy to build her own family and receives a long-lasting inheritance in terms of both authority and personality. Clearly, some of the characters' names work as clues to the reader and provide an important indication of the characters' roles. Consistently, Modesta's biological mother has no name, suggesting that she is an accident of biology. Therefore, this nameless woman disappears without leaving a trace.

The uniqueness of the novel lies in three main features that depict the overturning of a patriarchal order: the representation of the mother as a powerful and independent woman, the deconstruction and reconstruction of mother-daughter ties, and the appearance of gender-neutral (parental) behaviours. *L'Arte della Gioia* is considerably ahead of its time in relation to the representation of the mother-daughter bond. In the landscape of contemporary society and literature, the mothers and daughters portrayed in *L'Arte della Gioia* reveal an outstanding degree of originality and anticipate some of the features characteristic of the novels of the last generation of women writers. For the first time, these mothers and daughters occupy a space in which a male frame of reference is not the only one available. This is the same ideal space in which the authors of the new generation such as Scego, Parrella and Murgia, set their mother-daughter plots. In light of Sapienza's ability to reforge the mother-daughter tie, she acts as a fore-mother for the more recent writers investigated in this thesis, in spite of the fact that the reception of the book makes it accidentally contemporary with the novels by Scego, Parrella and Murgia.

In this chapter I analyse how Sapienza's novel introduces an unconventional notion of family, which disrupts gender hierarchies and challenges a traditional concept of kinship. Within this revised idea of family, I discuss Modesta's role as a daughter in relation to her three mothers and how she manages the transition towards motherhood. Finally, I discuss Modesta's role as a mother of biological and non-biological children, and how these three features make of the novel an interesting fictional rendition of feminist claims of its time.

1. Bonds that matter: Challenging a traditional notion of family and kinship

L'Arte della Gioia creates the conditions for a new kind of mother-daughter bond by expanding the notion of family and kinship. When Sapienza wrote her novel, Italian women did not have the right to divorce nor to have an abortion, despite their struggle to gain both. Marriage was still a prison, which put them in a state of subjugation and minority.[11] Aware of this disadvantageous

11 I discuss the condition of Italian women and their struggle for equality in Chapter 1. In *Lettera Aperta*, Sapienza describes marriage as the source of humiliations and suffering for women (1967: 132).

condition, Sapienza creates a character who proves herself able to escape the traps of both marriage and motherhood. Born at the beginning of the twentieth century, Modesta can choose between marriage or the convent, the second offering her, apparently, the best chance of autonomy. She chooses marriage, but she does it in a way that subverts the common idea of it. By marrying the Brandiforti prince, Modesta gains wealth, respect and power and breaks the boundaries imposed on her by her sex and her social origin. The prince, who lives in seclusion in a room of the villa and who Gaia and Beatrice refer to with contempt as “la cosa”, the thing (61), is not in a fit condition to fulfil his role. Being affected by a serious disability, he is as weak and dependent as a baby. Had he been a capable man, she would not have been permitted to marry him.

The marriage is seen by Beatrice, Gaia and the family members as a terrible sacrifice imposed on Modesta, who contributes in fostering this perception. These aspects of her marriage do not upset the protagonist, who considers it as her only access to power and freedom. In spite of Beatrice's disgust, Modesta is delighted with the chance she has been given: “Anche se sposata a un mostro, sempre principessina ero” (97). In fact, Modesta's marriage is not the result of a whimsical decision made out of despair, but a calculated foundation for her re-birth as a Principessa. Not only does she respect her matrimonial vow by taking care of her husband, but, when one of her lovers, Mattia, wants to kill the prince and marry her, she vigorously refuses. Modesta, who is not governed by the concept that love and marriage need to co-exist, knows that her marriage to Ippolito is not a burden, as Mattia suggests, but the guarantee of her freedom. Her choice does not imply that she has to renounce love. On the contrary, Modesta has many lovers, to whom she falls pregnant twice (although she decides to terminate her second pregnancy with an abortion). For Modesta, a love match never overlaps with marriage as an institution. The former is a source of joy, pleasure, pain and life, and can be temporary, as it originates from personal desires. The latter is a social necessity, since, in Judith Butler's (2004) words, “marriage compels, at least logically, universal recognition,” (111) and Modesta needs that recognition in order to be free.

Using her marriage as a shield, Modesta builds her own unconventional family, which is her most outstanding creation. In this wide group of women, men and children, whose status is not understandable according to the current paradigm of family intelligibility. Biological connections are uncertain and weak, while the bonds of affection are strong and long lasting. Some of Modesta's family members have a role that defies far-rooted traditions and taboos and would elicit scepticism even in a more evolved society than that of Sicily during the last century. In Chapter 1 I have already discussed how Butler's theory sheds light on this aspect of Sapienza's novel. As Butler argues,

> variations on kinship that depart from normative, dyadic heterosexually based family forms secured through the marriage vow are figured not only as dangerous, for the child, but perilous to the putative natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility (2004: 104).

Modesta's notion of kinship poses a challenge to those cultural laws. Biological kinship does not necessarily correspond to legal kinship in her family, and most characters have a double status, one given by legal and social norms, one determined by biology.

The structure of Modesta's family deserves a closer examination: of her two sons, officially born within her marriage, Prando is her biological son conceived with her lover Carmine, while Jacopo is the biological son of her husband Ippolito and of Ippolito's nurse Inés. Hence, there are no blood connections between the two brothers. Modesta's adopted daughter, Bambolina, is actually her grand-niece. Bambolina (Bambù) is the biological daughter of Beatrice, who was, in turn, the grand-daughter of Gaia and the niece of Ippolito. Therefore, Beatrice is Modesta's niece-by-marriage, and Bambolina is her grand-niece. Other children, such as 'Ntoni, Carluzzu and Crispina, are variously related to one or more adult members of the family. For instance, Carluzzu is born from an almost incestuous relationship. He is the biological son of Prando, Modesta's only biological child, and Stella, who is Jacopo's wet-nurse.

Modesta's family structure challenges “the current episteme of family intelligibility” (114) from two different points of view: the uncertain legal status of most of its members, and the lack of clear, traceable bloodlines. Anticipating Butler's (2004) questioning of the traditional idea of kinship, Modesta rearticulates her family in the light of her own desires. On the one hand, she seeks and gains legitimacy under the umbrella of apparently acceptable social forms such as marriage and legal kinship (i.e., Prando, Jacopo). On the other hand, her family has nothing in common with the nuclear, hegemonic family which marriage postulates (Carluzzu, 'Ntoni, Crispina, Mela and to some extent Bambolina). The idea of kinship holding her family together is “a set of practices that institutes relations of various kinds which negotiate the reproduction of life and the demands of death” (Butler, 2004: 103). These practices, however, bring with them no social recognisability and receive legitimacy only through Modesta's marriage to Ippolito.

In this context, kinship originating from desire proves to be stronger than that founded on the simple blood connection. When Jacopo discovers that his biological mother is Inès, the shock does not in the least affect his attachment to the family Modesta has chosen for him. On the contrary,

> Mai chiamerò mamma quella donna, mai. Tu sei la mia mamma, vero? Tu lo dicevi, e

> non lo capivo, che Bambolina ti era più figlia di Prando, che 'Ntoni ti era nipote anche se Stella non ti è sorella (392).

Unlike Jacopo, most of the members of this group are happily ignorant of the bloodlines that secretly connect them to one another (Beatrice, Prando, Mattia and Ida). Modesta is the only one who is fully aware of all the biological bonds. Behind the sanctifying marriage vow, Modesta builds her family as a middle zone characterised by what Butler calls “hybrid regions of legitimacy and illegitimacy that have no clear names, and where nomination itself falls into crisis” (2004: 108). Paradoxically, the legitimacy of this real and functional family is granted by the most unreal of the ties within it, namely, the marriage between Modesta and Ippolito.

Parenthood and kinship are subverted not only biologically, but also chronologically, since generations go back and forth. Gaia, who becomes Modesta's mother-in-law, is Beatrice's grand-mother, although she pretends to be her mother. In fact, before taking the vows, Leonora had had an affair with Carmine, the family bailiff, and gave birth to Beatrice. In order to avoid a scandal, Gaia claimed Beatrice as her own child and Leonora locked herself in a convent. Gaia is at the same time Leonora's biological mother and Modesta's third surrogate mother, replacing in this function her own daughter Leonora. Beatrice is like a sister to Modesta, in spite of the fact that Modesta also acts as a mother to her (as I discuss in the next sections). After Modesta's marriage to Ippolito, Beatrice becomes legally her niece-by-marriage, since Ippolito is Leonora's brother. The same is true of Carmine, who is Mattia's legal and biological father, but also Beatrice's and Prando's biological father, since both Modesta and Leonora fell pregnant to him. So Beatrice is legally Prando's cousin, but biologically she is both his half-sister and Mattia's half-sister. Had she not died, Beatrice would have also been Mattia's mother-in-law, when her daughter Bambolina becomes Mattia's partner. Being Beatrice's biological and legal daughter, Bambolina is also Mattia's niece, since her mother and her partner are half-brothers. When Stella gives birth to Carluzzu she finally traces a bloodline between herself and Modesta, since she conceived him with Modesta's biological son. Apart from going back and forth, generations based on bloodlines dissolve, while a different idea of family emerges, interwoven with a highly unconventional idea of sexuality, and maybe originating from it. Modesta's family is based on kinship practices “that emerge to address fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child-rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying and death” (Butler, 2004: 103).

Through Modesta's unconventional family and marriage, Sapienza criticises Italian society, which was attached to a narrowly traditional idea of family based on wedlock and blood connections, and whose concerns are based on formal aspects of appearance, with scant regard to

individual desires. Modesta's marriage overturns both social norms and the ruling legal system. While other married women became subject to their husbands' power by law, by marrying Ippolito Modesta becomes freer. While marriage posed a remarkable limitation for women of her age,[12] Modesta's decision to marry a 'fake' husband gains her real freedom, social recognition and power. Following Butler's statement that "ironically, one might say that through marriage personal desire acquires a certain anonymity and interchangeability" (2004: 111), we can go even further in arguing that in *L'Arte della Gioia* individuals can freely express their personal desires only beyond the bonds of traditional wedlock.

2. Modesta and her mothers.

In her subversion of the traditional idea of family, Sapienza radically reshapes the notion of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship. The novel presents a complex plot in which most women relate to each other following the pattern of a maternal-filial bond. The mother-daughter tie is depicted as a voluntary condition by virtue of which two women develop a bond that is not necessarily based on bloodlines, and is, to some extent, reversible. This revised notion of a maternal relationship becomes a source of female empowerment and fulfilment. Even though this statement applies to most maternal-filial relationships in the novel, it has to be noted that a significant evolution occurs between Modesta's experience as a daughter and the way in which she interprets the maternal role when she becomes a mother of daughters.

Modesta has three mothers. In chronological order, these are her nameless biological mother, then Leonora and, when Leonora dies, Gaia. Her wretched biological mother works as an anti-model. From her, Modesta learns what kind of woman she does not want to become. Her natural mother elicits contempt and disgust from Modesta, who remembers both her mother and sister as "un mucchio di stracci" (12). Having experienced male violence throughout her life, and being resigned to remain in the margins of society, her mother hates being a woman: "È una disgrazia nascere femmine, ti viene il sangue e addio salute e pace! Quelli non cercano che il loro piacere, ti squartano da cima a fondo e non si saziano mai" (15). The mother's efforts to pass onto Modesta her passive, defeated attitude are fruitless. Despite her young age, Modesta lucidly perceives her mother's hopelessness, and rejects any identification with her. In fact, when she is raped by her father, she allows no room for despair. After the initial shock, Modesta turns her fear into a determination to survive, escaping from men's violence and women's self-contempt: "Io prima ero

12 The parallel with the protagonist of *Una Donna* here highlights how stifling marriage could be for a woman, and what price a woman had to pay in order to get her freedom. As explained in Chapter 1, the nameless protagonist of *Una Donna* is forced to abandon her child in order to fulfil her desires. Selfless motherhood is the only alternative to self-fulfilment for her. This is not the case in *L'Arte della Gioia*.

una bambina, ma ora sono diventata femmina e devo stare attenta [...] Devo scappare. Ma dove?" (15). The reappearance of the father is crucial. The experience of sexual violence leads her to make an unexpected decision. That same night, Modesta starts a fire that kills her mother and sister. Through this act Modesta is not only trying to rid herself physically of the two miserable human beings who constitute her biological family, she also determines to uproot herself from the misery they represent. She achieves her goal, insofar as her mother's death represents a watershed in her life.

The nine-year-old orphan is entrusted to a convent where she soon finds a second mother. In fact, the Mother Superior takes on a plurality of maternal functions in relation to Modesta. To begin with, Leonora accomplishes the role of "primary language teacher" (Kristeva, 1989). As Modesta recalls: "Dalle labbra rosee e tenere di Madre Leonora […] seppi tante parole nuove e belle" (20). Feminist thinkers have broadly investigated the crucial role played by the mother in the transmission of language to a child. As Luisa Muraro (1991) maintains, "l'origine della vita non è separabile dall'origine del linguaggio, né il corpo dalla mente" (49). Assuming that language is a social product learnt from other speakers through a social exchange[13], Muraro argues that the fundamental experience of learning language takes place through the relationship with the mother (50-1), regarded as a special kind of social exchange characterised by disparity. Through language, Leonora also introduces Modesta to the world of culture. The girl is fascinated by Leonora's library, whose shelves are laden with volumes that arouse her curiosity and admiration: "E quei libri erano pieni di tutte quelle parole e storie che Madre Leonora mi insegnava" (20). While all the nuns pity the little girl for what they consider a huge misfortune, the Mother Superior discovers Modesta's intelligence and decides to offer her the best education available within the walls of a nunnery. Furthermore, as Antonella Cagnolati suggests, Leonora compensates for the love Modesta did not receive from her mother (2011: 65).

Leonora's protection represents for Modesta a second birth. In fact, through Leonora Modesta gains access to a privileged social context from which her first birth into abject poverty had excluded her. Furthermore, Leonora provides Modesta with a future when, later on, she makes a decision that changes both her destiny and that of Modesta. In her will Leonora leaves instructions giving Modesta the option of temporarily living outside the nunnery before taking vows and becoming a nun. Modesta, instead, yearns to discover life outside the convent. As she grows older, her intellectual curiosity and thirst for life lead her to see Leonora as an obstacle. Hence, driven by her ambition, she forms her plan to eliminate Leonora, whose death will open the gate to the world for the young woman. Eventually, she finds a way to cause her second mother's death without

13 Cfr: F. de Saussure, *Corso di Linguistica Generale*, 1967: 19.

raising any suspicion. Her second matricide, disguised under the appearance of an accidental death, frees Modesta from a maternal figure who had turned repressive and suffocating and allows her, as we will see, to make another leap upwards in the social order.

At the age of seventeen, Modesta finds her third maternal figure in Gaia, who is Leonora's biological mother and the head of the ancient Brandiforti's family estate. As Gaia remarks, Leonora has handed down to her the role of Modesta's adoptive mother once her own maternal task had ended: “Certo che Leonora sventata era come Beatrice, ma gusto e intelligenza ne aveva. Sembra proprio che me l'abbia trovata e allevata per sollevarmi in questi ultimi anni” (89). From Leonora, Modesta received a new life, language and education; from Gaia, Modesta received social recognition and power.

Not only does Gaia, as a temporary mother, offer an inspiring role model to Modesta, she also provides her with a great opportunity. Appreciating her intelligence, Gaia takes Modesta on as her assistant in the complex management of the family estate. By virtue of her privileged position, the young woman can now observe Gaia closely and she takes full advantage of learning by her side. However, Modesta soon discovers that even the third maternal figure is becoming a hindrance to her urge for freedom. Gaia is hopelessly tied to the past and does not want to move forward, preventing her grand-daughter Beatrice and Modesta from enjoying a life outside the villa. By no means willing to give in to Gaia's insane prohibition, Modesta is eager to see the world and her yearning for the sea and for the town is a metaphor for this wish. The two wills are doomed to clash:

> Non era pazzia. Aveva deciso di morire trascinandoci tutti con lei […] E poiché anch'io avevo una mia volontà, o piano, o decisione, che agli altri avrebbe potuto sembrare pazzia, l'avrei fatta agire, questa pazzia, con lo stesso polso fermo di quella grande vecchia che ammiravo. L'ammiravo, ma doveva morire (113).

Modesta realises that she also has to eliminate Gaia (“doveva morire”) in order to move ahead in her life. Again, she manages to accomplish her plan in a way which is half a crime and half an opportunity offered by fate.

Modesta's third matricide, which is affected by a lucid, far-sighted resolution, as it was in Leonora's case, marks the completion of her social ascent. Prior to this, Modesta had already secured for herself a position within the family by marrying Gaia's disabled son Ippolito. Therefore, after Gaia's death, Modesta, as the legitimate wife of the prince and Gaia's daughter-in-law, becomes the “principessa”, inheriting the power, the wealth and the title that once belonged to her

adoptive mother. As 'mater familias', Modesta reshapes the family structure and function so that it follows a completely different pattern. Gaia, frozen in the grip of the past, had kept alive the memory of dead family members by insisting their rooms remained untouched. In contrast, Modesta, once granted the power and title of *principessa*, builds her family as a lively and heterogeneous group of people whose connection is based on love and affection rather than on bloodlines.

Both Modesta's role as a daughter and her relationships with her mothers find several parallels in Italian literature and philosophy. In the 1980s and 1990s, Italian women writers such as Francesca Sanvitale, Fabrizia Ramondino, Elena Ferrante and others[14] engaged in a depiction of motherhood which put forward the relationship between mother and daughter as a symbolic alternative to the mother-son dyad. In their works, the mother-daughter relationship is observed from the point of view of the daughter and depicted as simultaneously crucial and painful. A strikingly recurrent aspect of those novels is that in all of them the daughter looks at the mother with a mixture of passion and resentment.

Starting in the early 1980s, for the ensuing three decades Italian feminists too have investigated the difficult relationship of the adult daughter with her mother, laying the blame on Italian culture and its privileging the love between mother and son, as I have discussed in Chapter 1. Chiara Zamboni (1995) sheds light on how the relationship between mother and daughter becomes painful due to the lack of an appropriate symbolic frame of reference. Borrowing her words, it can be argued that "[...] la mancanza di figure simboliche che ne dicano il legame nel rispetto della loro individualità" (39) accounts for the difficulties of the mother-daughter relationship in both social and symbolical terms. More recently, Adriana Cavarero (2007) reiterates that "questa società androcentrica cancella o comunque rende problematica la relazione madre-figlia" (49). The debate soon led to the theorisation of a new notion of the maternal-filial relationship, based on a voluntary bond, rather than on a biological one. This alternative pattern of relationship between women was defined initally as *affidamento* and, later, as *pratica delle relazioni*.[15] *Affidamento* offers a solution to a difficulty experienced by women and investigated by theorists for decades, since "society does

14 Examples of these novels include Francesca Sanvitale's *Madre e figlia*, Fabrizia Raimondino's *Althenopis*, Carla Cerati's *La Cattiva Figlia*, Francesca Duranti's *La Bambina* as well as Edith Bruck's *Lettera alla Madre*, Helena Janeczek's *Lezioni di Tenebra*, Elena Ferrante's *L'Amore Molesto* and Clara Sereni's *Il Gioco dei Regni*. I discuss these texts in Chapter 1.

15 Italian feminist thinkers have clarified that they prefer to use the term *pratica delle relazioni* instead of *pratica dell'affidamento* to describe this kind of relationship between women in that the notion of entrustment can engender misunderstanding by suggesting the idea of a hierarchical dynamic implicit in the "affidamento", as some critics have argued (Cfr Scarparo, 2005: 43 and Parati, 2002: 65-7). However, scholars have criticised *la pratica delle relazion*i because the asymmetrical relationship produced by *affidamento* implies the same risk of authoritarianism as highlighted in fields other than the theory of sexual difference. Several scholars have examined the limits of entrustment. For a detailed survey, see Accati, (1995), Giorgio (1997) and Parati (2002).

not have the means to establish the ties which a woman really needs, between body and words, between herself and her peers" (Muraro 1991a: 125).

Sapienza's novel anticipates, by several years, both writers and theorists. Modesta's relationship with her non-biological mothers, in fact, is close to what Italian theorists call *affidamento*. As I have already discussed in Chapter 1, *affidamento* originates from a disparity between women, so that a woman decides to entrust herself ("affidarsi") to another woman in order to find her place in the world. When Modesta chooses Leonora and then Gaia as maternal models, she is partially following the educational paradigm of entrustment as explained by Annamaria Piussi (1987):

> [...] questi processi di crescita e di realizzazione di sé, per i quali è necessaria la liberazione non fittizia di parola e desiderio corrispondenti al proprio sesso, non si attivano al di fuori del rapporto con una donna autorevole, che legittimi le donne non adulte *a progettare e costruire la propria esistenza al di fuori dei percorsi già dati*" (147-8 *emphasis mine*).

Both Leonora and Gaia provide invaluable assistance to the young Modesta. Thank to Leonora, she escapes her fate of misery and ignorance, and thanks to Gaia she avoids becoming a nun and being buried in a convent. It is only through Leonora's and gaia's intervention that the protagonist of the novel can "progettare e costruire la [sua] esistenza al di fuori dei percorsi già dati". Analysing a similar kind of fictional rendition of relationships between women, Adriana Chemello defines this bond as a "disparità feconda" (25), adopting the same word, "disparità", chosen by Italian theorists to describe the asymmetric relationship characterising the *affidamento.*

However, while there are some elements of entrustment in the bond between Modesta and her two adoptive mothers, there are also aspects that clearly depart from *affidamento* as elaborated by the Women's Collective Book-store (1987), by Diotima and by Muraro. In fact, in their definition, *affidamento* is a choice of freedom and occurs in a de-patriarchalised context. In Sapienza's novel, Leonora and Gaia are certainly loved as mothers by Modesta, and admired too, but both women are deeply embedded in a patriarchal order that they do not dare (in the case of Leonora) or want (in the case of Gaia) to challenge. Furthermore, both Leonora and Gaia want to tie Modesta to the same patriarchal scheme to which they belong: they love her and are loved by her as long as they provide a precious support, but they are not prepared to help their young protegee to prosper according to her own desires. In fact, when Modesta kills Leonora and Gaia, because they do not support her any more and both represent, in psychoanalytical terms, the phallic mother, that is "a terrifying figure of omnipotence whom the daughter must flee to ensure some autonomy and identity for herself"

(Wright, 263). Consequently, Modesta's biological mother corresponds to the castrated mother, that is “a mother lacking or deficient with whom the daughter does not wish to identify, and from whom she turns, in humiliation and hatred, to the father” (Wright, 263). It can be said that Modesta's relationships with Leonora and Gaia represent two attempts of approximation that are set to move towards *affidamento* as an ideal model. My interpretation finds support in Farnetti, who, in relation to Modesta's troubled relationships with her mothers, argues that “le occorrerebbe una pratica della disparità” (2011: 99).

Only when Modesta becomes a mother is she able to develop relationships with other women that exactly correspond to the “pratica dell'affidamento” or “della disparità”, in that Modesta has created a de-patriarchalised context in which women can freely develop their bonds. In more recent years, Italian theorists have refined their definition of *affidamento*, and clarified that it does not necessarily imply a difference in age. It rather stems from disparities in competence between women. In the practice of entrustment “a woman recognizes that another woman has something more, *un di più* (as it is generally called), which, she believes, will also help her realize her full potential and mediate her access to the social world” (Scarparo 2005: 42). This is exemplified by Beatrice and Stella who entrust themselves to Modesta and recognise her maternal authority in spite of being the same age (Beatrice) or even older (Stella) than Modesta. Modesta's relationships with Beatrice, Stella and Bambù can also be interpreted from a different perspective, in that they anticipate Irigaray's claim that women need to “establish a woman to woman relationship of reciprocity with [...] mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be [...] daughters” (1991: 50), as I have discussed in Chapter 1. In her re-articulation of the mother-daughter bond, Sapienza was not interested in forging “an easy feminist role model” (Ross, 15), nor did she receive any acknowledgment for her insightful description of a mother-daughter relationship based on a voluntary tie. Nevertheless, her novel provides an excellent fictional representation of *affidamento* between women in a society that was antithetical to providing this kind of support.

The debate on *affidamento* soon called into question a revision of the concept of authority. In the 1980s, Italian theorists drew attention to the need to define the concept of authority, especially in relation to the mother. Following Hannah Arendt's elaborations (1958 and 1959), the philosophical community Diotima (1995) investigated how the concept of authority works in the context of the mother-daughter relationship. During the twentieth century the definition of authority has been profoundly controversial, as is demonstrated by the huge body of work produced by philosophers. As the Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben (2005) warns, some theorists have stressed that the person who holds authority enjoys a status of exception, a position that leads to authoritarianism and dictatorship (76-8). In my analysis of the mother-daughter relationship, I refer exclusively to the

notion of authority as developed by Arendt and the Diotima group.[16]

Authority in this context cannot be equated with power. As Annarosa Buttarelli (1995) argues, the Latin roots of the words 'authority' and 'power' are, respectively, *auctoritas* and *potestas.* While *potestas* grounds its validation in the rule of law and is an instrument of government, *auctoritas*, instead, is based on consent and only exists within a relationship. In the context of the Roman civilisation, *potestas* is the public power held by magistrates and is assigned through a procedure established by law. *Auctoritas* is the recognition conferred to an extraordinary person and implies an exceptional status.[17]

In the ancient context, *potestas* and *auctoritas* refer to two radically distinct patterns of relationship. The former implies hierarchy, the second asymmetry. The same distinction applies to the modern concepts of authority and power as investigated by Diotima. Power is institutional. Authority, instead, is personal and relational. It is something that is given and received through a voluntary act of recognition, as long as "this type of authority does not belong to one person as such, but exists within the relationship between two people" (Scarparo, 2005: 45). For this reason the concept of authority, as opposed to power, works well in feminist theory, in regard to the maternal position of power. As Buttarelli states,

> Nel concetto [di autorità] è contenuta l'idea che vi sia una richiesta di chi ha meno (competenza, esperienza, ecc) diretta verso chi ha *la facoltà di* "aumentare," di *portare a prosperità*, operazione possibile per la consensualità vigente tra richiedente e consigliera (87 *emphasis mine*).

In other words, in feminist theory authority is someone else's mediation with the purpose of helping others and oneself achieving a goal: "Si riconosce autorità a chi mette in movimento situazioni e persone di un certo contesto, in cui si vive, nella direzione che si desidera di quella realtà" (Zamboni, 1995: 40).

The distinction between power and authority is particularly helpful for understanding Modesta's

16 The connection between *auctoritas*/authority and motherhood is accredited even in fields of investigation other than feminist theory. For instance, in his pivotal work on Indo-European language and society, the French linguist Émile Benveniste suggests that the Indo-European root of the verb *augeo* "denotes not the increase in something which already exists, but the act of producing from one's own breast" (1969, 2: 148/422).

17 For instance, at the pitch of his powerful ascent, the *princeps* Octavianus was awarded with the title of Augustus. The Prince refers to himself as *auctore*, the one who makes other prosper and grow, in Chapter 34 of his *Res Gestae*. In line with this choice, the Senate awarded him the title on the 16th of January 27 BC. Like *auctoritas*, the term Augustus, too, is derived from the Latin verb *augere*, "to make the others grow." By deciding to be named Augustus, the prince wanted to present himself as the person who made the state prosper and thrive. Moving from the public to the private sphere, the same distinction applies. In Roman family law, *potestas* usually refers to the power of a *pater familias* over his off-spring (*patria potestas*), which includes the power of life and death. *Auctoritas*, instead, is the power of the father to validate and grant legitimacy to someone else's actions (Agamben, 76; Frier, 2003).

relationship with other women. It is the recognition of authority, regarded as “la facoltà di portare a prosperità”, that first validates Modesta's relationships with her adoptive mothers, and later characterises her relationship with other women in her family, towards whom she acts as a mother. The focus on female authority is a remarkable aspect of the novel, especially if we consider that for many years feminist debates in Italy hinged on the distinct lack of authority affecting the maternal figure within patriarchal institutions. Even two decades after the completion of Sapienza's novel, many feminists still perceived “una difficoltà di parlare di autorità delle donne” (Sartori, 1995: 5).

In relation to authority, there is a significant difference between Modesta's mothers and Modesta as a mother. Leonora and Gaia, both embedded in a patriarchal system of values, never achieved maternal authority. Only in their relationship with Modesta were they bestowed authority by their adoptive daughter. This is particularly evident in the case of Gaia. Both Gaia and Modesta occupy the space of men, that is, power. However, while Modesta's position of power is rooted in her female authority, Gaia's was grounded in male power. Having gained power from the men of her family because of a fortuitous circumstance (none of them survived), Gaia thinks of herself as an exceptional kind of woman, and despises all other women. Unlike Gaia, Modesta does not want to be an exception in a world of men (349), but a woman whose authority is recognised by, and bestowed upon, other women. Her authority, then, allows other women to flourish beyond the bounds of stereotyped limitations imposed by a patriarchal society.

From my examination, it clearly emerges that authority can only exist within a relationship that rests on mutual recognition. Analysing the formation of a person's identity through the mother-child relationship, Jessica Benjamin also defines this process of mutual recognition. According to Benjamin, in fact, both mother and child have the vital necessity “of recognizing as well as being recognized” (1988: 23). The same happens in the mother-daughter relationship when authority is bestowed.

By combining mutual recognition and authority, Modesta initiates a different kind of genealogy. Hers is a matrilineal transmission, whose founding moment is highlighted through a rite of passage that resembles an actual ordination. It occurs when Gaia officially invests her adopted daughter with her power, and gives the following orders to a bewildered Carmine: “Da oggi, qui, davanti a me, padrona la devi chiamare. Capito Carmine? Padrona” (89-90). From this moment onwards a transmission of female authority begins. It is interesting to note here that “padrona” (mistress, owner) has its seeds in the word “padre” (father) and refers to power meant as *potestas*.

The choice of words used by Gaia highlights once more how Gaia's power has a masculine origin, while Modesta's has a feminine origin. In fact, by receiving her power from a woman (and not from her husband or father, as Gaia did), Modesta dismisses the hierarchical organisation

demanded by power and creates an alternative mode of relationship with others. In other words, Modesta inaugurates a female succession in which the power transmitted is turned into authority, namely, maternal authority.

This process echoes the elaboration of feminist thinkers. Borrowing Dominijanni's words, we can say that Modesta's subversion of the male transmission of power

> apre a una concezione dell'autorità femminile come figura *dinamica* dello scambio, non come figura *statica* dell'obbedienza o dell'ammirazione né tantomeno della dipendenza (1995: 16 *emphasis mine*).

In Dominijanni's words, the concepts of 'static' and 'dynamic' correspond respectively to a patriarchal and a non-patriarchal logic. A static conception of authority is based on passive compliance ("obbedienza"). A dynamic notion, instead, calls into question a different mode of relationship and applies to most of the relationships between women in *L'Arte della Gioia*. Arguably, the dynamic (and temporary) version of the maternal bond depicted in Sapienza's novel is the most effective way "to establish the ties which a woman really needs" (Muraro, 1991a: 125).

While reducing the importance of biological mothers, Sapienza places great emphasis on motherhood as a relational practice. However much it is discussed and problematised, the maternal role is widely accepted as the most powerful source of identification for a young woman (Cavarero, 2007: 46) since every woman who becomes a mother has (or had) a mother. This is true also for the female characters in *L'Arte della Gioia*, whose mothers, however, are not permanently assigned by biology, but are temporarily chosen according to the daughters' needs and desires.

Mothers play a crucial role in the novel, even when they are no longer alive. This may appear as an apparent paradox, but it is not: the lesson they have taught the younger women is always valid, especially in the case of Modesta. Therefore, even if it is true that once the maternal figure becomes an obstacle, the protagonist removes her by physically eliminating her, nevertheless she does not forget what that mother, as a model, has taught her and she continues to benefit from what she has learnt. In spite of the profound differences between the three women in terms of personality and social role, Modesta's behaviour towards her mothers is fundamentally the same. She learns as much as she can from each of them, using their example as a mirror to build her own identity as a woman, and then she disposes of them, with no regrets. Unlike her biological mother, who represents an exclusively negative model for Modesta, both the adoptive mothers elicit Modesta's admiration. In fact, Modesta maintains a high regard for what she has learnt from them, especially from Gaia: "Quante cose avevo imparato da quella vecchia! La sentivo dentro di me che s'ergeva

nella sua solitudine orgogliosa" (138).

Initially, Modesta's imitation of her mothers' attitude is almost uncontrolled: "Terrorizzata, sentii la voce di madre Leonora che parlava per le mie labbra" (76). After a while, she learns how to use Leonora's habits. After Gaia's death, Modesta takes on both her role and attitude. In the beginning this happens by chance: "Come avrete capito, non sapendo come comportarmi con quel ragazzo, avevo preso in prestito le maniere brusche della principessa buonanima. Funzionava sempre" (138). However, after a while, Modesta adapts the lessons learnt from her mentors to best suit her own purposes. While Leonora and Gaia are physically dead, they are still alive in Modesta's manipulative personality.

An example of Modesta's conscious manipulation of her maternal models is offered by the dialogue between her and Inès, the nurse she hired to take care of Ippolito. Unexpectedly, Inès has fallen pregnant to the prince and Modesta has to deal with this awkward situation, supported by Gaia's and Leonora's wit in a very humorous internal dialogue. On this occasion, she negotiates the most appropriate countenance drawing both from her own and from Gaia's repertoir: "Cercai un compromesso dentro di me tra Modesta e Gaia" (178). Modesta suggests an abortion as the most practical solution to Inès' case, but the nurse wants to keep the baby in order to take advantage this circumstance affords. Since Inès proves to be more arrogant than expected, both Modesta and Gaia are indignant: "Ma che hai capito? sia Modesta che Gaia stavano per perdere la pazienza" (180). In order to enhance the effect of her words, Modesta also imitates Gaia's body language: "Mi rizzai sul letto, appoggiandomi alla spalliera come Gaia faceva. Grande vecchia, quella!" (178). During the dialogue with the shrewd nurse, Modesta lucidly considers both her position and Inès' and, with a hint of amusement, concludes without grudge: "A modo suo, cara Gaia, sa di essere necessaria all'andamento della casa e ci ha chiuso la bocca: scacco matto!" (181).

In the above-mentioned passage Modesta is conversing with Gaia on the one hand, while using Gaia's features to negotiate with Inès on the other. Although Modesta is voluntarily choosing some of Gaia's habits, she does not identify completely with her, as she explains to Beatrice: "Io non sono come tua nonna, anche se da lei ho imparato molte cose" (145). Modesta's identification with the role model goes only as far as is necessary, while murder is the means she uses to maintain distance from all her maternal figures.

3. From Motherhood to Matricide

Modesta's readiness to change her maternal model recalls the concept of *continuum materno*, developed by Muraro (1991), as opposed to the notion of "isteria, che è il rifiuto di accettare la

sostituzione della madre" (54). If hysteria is a woman's refusal to replace the mother, *continuum materno* instead occurs when a woman accepts the substitution of the mother, or, borrowing Muraro's words,

> [i]l fatto, noto e meraviglioso, per cui la madre biologica può essere sostituita da altre figure senza che la relazione di lei con la sua creatura perda le sue fondamentali caratteristiche. In questo fatto si potrebbe vedere l'irrilevanza dell'elemento naturale e la rilevanza esclusiva della struttura [...] (1991: 53-4).

From this perspective, Modesta goes even further: not only does she welcome the replacement of the mother as a natural step in the evolution of an adult woman, but she actively participates in the substitution every time the mother is no longer working as a model or a support. The search for a mother (and the possibility of replacing her) is an issue widely discussed by feminists of different generations. According to Adrienne Rich (1976), whose work *Of Woman Born* is still a canonical text for the investigation of the mother-daughter bond, "the woman who has felt 'unmothered' may seek mothers all her life […]" (242-3). Modesta does this only three times in her life, until she reaches the age of adulthood and herself holds maternal authority, which she uses to support other women's desires.

In Sapienza's deconstruction of the maternal-filial bond, not only is the fact that mothers are replaceable remarkable, but also, and even more significantly, is the originality with which she has this replacement take place, namely, matricide. If the rejection of the model embodied by the biological mother is a recurrent theme in twentieth century women's writings, Sapienza's novel stands out for its protagonist's determination to remove damaging maternal figures by adopting the most extreme means.

While matricide is uncommon in narratives about the mother-daughter dyad, in *L'Arte della Gioia* Modesta commits, literally and metaphorically, three matricides. A recent study on Sapienza comprises two[18] essays dedicated to Modesta's crimes, one authored by Monica Farnetti, the other by Laura Fortini (2011). In light of Modesta's four murders (those of her three mothers and her biological sister Tina), Farnetti points out that all the victims are female. They have to die because they disfigure "l'ideale altissimo che Modesta ha del suo genere" (90). In Modesta's view, these women are sacrilegious in that they "mortificano [...] ciò che lei vorrebbe adorare mentre mettono a repentaglio, insieme alla sua libertà, la sua stessa incolumità [...]" (96). Therefore, Farnetti argues

18 The complementarity of the two essays is made evident by the titles, which are respectively: "*L'Arte della Gioia* e il genio dell'omicidio" and "*L'Arte della Gioia* e il genio dell'omicidio mancato."

that Modesta's murders are acts of self-defense, inspired by a “misoginia amorosa” (92).[19] Embracing Farnetti's thesis that Modesta's murders are justifiable homicides, Fortini focuses instead on the difference between “omicidio compiuto” and “omicidio mancato” in the novel. In fact, in order to survive, Modesta only kills women (omicidio compiuto), while men, like her father, disappear without leaving a trace (omicidio mancato), or die for other reasons, such as vengeance, politics and so on. Fortini argues that “perché vi sia omicidio, occorre che vi sia un corpo, un soggetto/oggetto che si uccide” (125-6). Paralleling male and female figures in the novel with the existence of two distinct literary traditions, a male-centred one and an alternative one characterised by “un altro stile dell'enunciazione, quello femminile,” (124) Fortini suggests that men embody a tradition to which Sapienza, as a writer, does not belong. Therefore, she cannot make her heroine kill male figures in the novel, as long as: “Non vi è bisogno di uccidere la tradizione se non ve ne è necessità per la propria sopravvivenza” (126).

Farnetti and Fortini suggest a fascinating hypothesis to interpret the extraordinary representation of a woman who kills other women in order to assert her own freedom, and who shows no moral concern for doing so. Neither uses the term matricide in relation to Modesta's murders. In my opinion, however, matricide is the most significant element of *L'Arte della Gioia* in terms of symbolical structures. To begin with, there are many female characters in the novel, but Modesta only kills her mothers (her sister Tina's death was a fallout of killing her biological mother). Secondly, matricides are concentrated in the first part of the novel, where Modesta's apprenticeship in life takes place. Finally, her three matricides are carried out before she herself becomes a mother. Significantly, it is Modesta's pregnancy that precipitates her decision to kill Gaia, who forbade her to have children.

While I agree with Fortini's assumption that the gendered use of murders mirrors the author's desire to differentiate herself from an hegemonic, male-dominated literary tradition, I push this argument even further. My view is that the substance of Sapienza's novel overturns something much deeper than a literary tradition. The novel, in fact, prefigures a female frame of reference which is founded on the matricidal act, and finds its validation through the transmission of maternal authority. Modesta's acts are not just a struggle for the power between two women, a mother and a daughter. By killing her mothers, Modesta eliminates the patriarchal notion of motherhood and starts building a female, matrilineal genealogy in which women's authority is not an exceptional event, but becomes a new norm of fact. Therefore, I argue that these are not simply murders, but

19 A similar point is made by Pellegrino in his interview with Tania Maffei. In relation to Modesta's decision to kill her mother, Leonora and then Gaia, he states that they have to die because they represent “[...] la catena che le impedisce di andare oltre, di uscire da quella condizione di miseria in cui si trova” (73) and “di raggiungere i suoi obiettivi” (77).

they are matricides, and as such they assume a variety of symbolical meanings in regard to the formation of the daughter's identity.

To begin with, by having the female protagonist kill her biological mother, the author challenges the centrality of biological motherhood, especially in the context of the mother-daughter relationship. Modesta is actually depicted as a good mother to her biological son Prando, but there is no example of a successful relationship between a mother and her biological daughter in the novel. Most female characters (Beatrice, Modesta herself, Bambù and to an extent Leonora and Stella) do not have a relationship with their biological mother, and take another woman as a surrogate mother. Unlike the biological mother, the elective mother is always depicted in a favourable light. She is supportive and helpful, providing a positive model to identify with, despite the fact of being provisional and replaceable, or, maybe, precisely by virtue of this characteristic.

There is a second and extremely striking meaning behind the three crimes. In a male frame of reference, the killing of the father is always due to a struggle for power, as in the myth of Oedipus, the son who kills his father to take his place, and, for the same reason, marries his own mother. In the mythological context, matricide is an act of revenge achieved on behalf of the father. It responds to patriarchal logic, as in the best known case of Orestes and Electra, who assassinate their mother, Clytemnestra, since she had murdered her husband, and their father, Agamemnon. So Agamemnon's children decide to kill their mother as an act of divine justice, in obedience to the Law-of-the Father.[20] Following the pattern provided by Greek mythology, the psychoanalytical paradigm also depicts patricide as a way of de-stabilising and then incorporating the paternal role, since the father represents normativity, and thus power, as investigated by many scholars such as Freud, Lacan, Butler, Benjamin and others.

In Sapienza's subversion of the Oedipal structure, Modesta replaces fathers with mothers, and, in the case of Gaia, power with authority. The actual killing of her mothers, which enables Modesta to become an adult and to make her own decisions, parallels the symbolic killing of the father as theorised in psychoanalytical theory. Sapienza appropriates the Freudian tenet and reshapes it according to a female framework of significance. If the male child has to kill the father, as the source of authority and rules, to become adult, here Modesta kills the mother since she attributes to her the authority she could not find in male figures. However, matricide here represents more than

20 This is what happens, for instance, in *Alice nell'Ombra*, (2002) a novel by Barbara Garlaschelli in which a daughter commits matricide. The protagonist, Alice, is unloved by her mother and has lost her father. When she realises that her father had been murdered by her mother many years earlier, she decides to enact a revenge. She kills her mother, her mother's girl friend and the son of the latter. After the matricidal act, Alice is still miserable, and, to borrow Irigaray's words, “buried in madness” (1991: 36). In fact, unlike Modesta's killing, Alice's murderous act is dictated by patriarchal logic, according to which women are excluded from subjectivity and doomed to frustration when they try to gain subjectivity by identifying with the father.

the same old story performed with inverted genders. In fact, it is the death of Modesta's three mothers that allows her re-birth as a completely new woman, freed from patriarchal constraints. As Irigaray contends, this “rebirth is necessary for women […] It cannot take place unless it is freed from man's archaic projection onto her” (1991: 42). And Modesta's patriarchal mothers represented exactly this “archaic projection” of which she has ridden herself. Under this lens, the case of Gaia is particularly interesting. By causing her death, Modesta obtains Gaia's place and title and authority. The killing of the mother as a figure of authority, therefore, is necessary to occupy her space while developing a female genealogy. This matrilineal transmission is the invisible engine behind Modesta's crimes.

This last remark elicits a question: to what extent are Modesta's crimes real crimes? And to what extent are they symbolical? As I have mentioned earlier, scholars are debating as to how to interpret Modesta's murders. In regard to this, Pellegrino contends that Modesta does not kill Leonora and Gaia, she rather helps them to die (2011: 73). In my opinion, Modesta's murders anticipate what Diotima calls “la magica forza del negativo”. Instead of denying the existence of “evil” (“il negativo”) within human beings, Modesta acknowledges it and uses it as a valuable resource, so that the “negativo” (which is expressed through her murderous acts) can do a precious work for her: “sciogliere legami non liberi […] alleggerire la volontà da fardelli insensati” (Muraro, 2005: 1).

Feminist theory validates and supports my interpretation of the matricidal act as a subversion of a male-centred idea of society and power. Luce Irigaray argues that matricide is the crime on which Western culture is built (1991). Analysing the myth of Orestes and his sister Electra, she demonstrates how the Law-of-the-Father is enforced precisely through the murder of the mother and the murderer's acquittal, in that matricide is not a serious offence, compared to the murder of the father. Taking the cue from Irigaray's theory, Amber Jacobs contends that, in the Law-of-the-Father, matricide corresponds to the erasure of the mother from the symbolical order. Therefore, in her re-reading of the Greek myth, Jacobs advocates for the overturning of this erasure to allow the mother symbolical fertility and access to a non-patriarchal frame of reference. The reiteration of matricides at the hands of a daughter shows that *L'Arte della Gioia* has inverted this process, which, in fact, leads to an opposite outcome, namely the creation of a de-patriarchalised space for women.

It has to be noted that the dismissal of the patriarchal mother and the discovery of a new kind of mother-daughter pattern of relationship is still in its initial stages in the novel. In Chapter 5, I analyse the case of a daughter who commits matricide outside of a patriarchal logic, in obedience to an unspoken law of the mother and I demonstrate how, through matricide, she identifies with her mother. Modesta, instead, has to kill her mothers in order to differentiate herself from them. On the one hand, this can be read as an original interpretation of those contradictory feelings towards the

mother that characterised most fictional mother-daughter relationships for decades. On the other hand, in Sapienza the physical elimination of the mother goes hand in hand with the daughter's incorporation of the model embodied by that very mother, which is unprecedented. By combining fragments of her murdered mothers into her own personality, Modesta creates a completely new, non-patriarchal idea of motherhood.

4. Gender-neutral parental roles: Modesta as a mother

As a daughter, Modesta gained from her adoptive mothers a maternal authority her mothers never possessed. Therefore, when she becomes a mother, Modesta creates a family governed by her own authority, with the purpose of helping her offspring grow, rather then imposing her will on them. As a woman, Modesta breaks the monstrous chain of maternal enslavement, to borrow Sibilla Aleramo's words (“la mostruosa catena”, 1906: 145). Modesta's act particularly affects her relationship with her daughters. In the family she creates, not only does the maternal bond cease to be a means of transmission of conventional gendered roles for all her children, but it also becomes part of a legacy of maternal authority for her daughters, as well as a source of female empowerment. This is made possible by the fact that Modesta, as a mother, has the power to act in, and to modify, a society in which, otherwise, the mother-daughter relationship has no validation.

Crucial to this is the fact that she is an independent woman: economically, since she is in control of her money; physically, since she is in control of her body and life, capable of rejecting conventions and limits imposed by society; and emotionally, since she does not give in to the overwhelming demands of her lovers and children, and knows how and when to 'let them go'. Modesta offers both her example and her unfailing support to the younger women in her family, especially Bambù, who is eager to proceed along the same path. For instance, Bambolina decides to live with the man she loves outside of wedlock. Marriage is a choice that a woman makes only when she has need of it, as Modesta comments about her own experience: “Ci si sposa solo per bisogno” (241). And Bambù has no such need, thanks to her adoptive mother. In fact, aware of the importance of economic independence for a woman, the far-sighted Modesta has wisely preserved Bambolina's inheritance over the years: “I soldi di bambolina non si toccano! una donna è perduta senza soldi” (284). Therefore, as an adult woman, Bambù does not depend on her partner and can avoid marriage. However, when Modesta confronts Bambolina over her decision to live with Mattia, she suddenly realises that her maternal function has come to an end. Therefore, Modesta entirely dismisses her parental role (416), in compliance with her practice of temporary motherhood. Modesta's fostering role is evident also in relation to other young women, such as

Mela, who is encouraged and economically supported to persevere with her passion for music, so that she becomes a talented musician. Modesta displays the same supportive, non-intrusive approach with all of her offspring, regardless of sex, bloodlines and legal status.

According to Muraro, in the experience of most Italian women, the maternal bond is often fraught with feelings of hostility and mistrust leading to "una sistematica rivolta delle figlie contro le madri, che ha accompagnato il passaggio dalla civiltà contadina a quella urbana e industriale" (1995: 120). *L'Arte della Gioia* does not conform to this perception of the relationship between mother and daughter. After dismissing the problematic figure of the patriarchal mother, the novel depicts the maternal-filial tie as the main source of power, freedom, solidarity and joy for women. Breaking the chain of self-hatred and rage that tore mother and daughter apart in an androcentric society, Modesta anticipates the Italian feminists' claim for a different solidarity between mother and daughter. Through her uncompromising determination to create different family relationships and a fairer social order, Modesta does for her daughters and other members of her family (such as Beatrice, Joyce and Stella) "the most important thing one woman can do for another: to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities" (Rich, 246). Although the relationship between mother and daughter can be painful and destructive,[21] there is no reason why it is doomed to be so, as the example of Modesta demonstrates. Through her protagonist, Sapienza provides an isolated example of how women can live and happily develop their bonds, their personalities and their desires in a way forged by themselves and to their own liking, while simultaneously assisting other women to achieve the same goals.

It is interesting to note that Modesta's most difficult filial relationship is that with her son Prando. Sapienza here engages with the traditional idealisation of the mother-son dyad in Italian literature, as discussed in Chapter 1, and overturns it. In fact, Modesta's bond with her only biological child is the most challenging for her. In spite of his adoration for his mother, Prando is laden with stereotyped and conservative notions of gender roles, and his expectations clash with the reality of the family Modesta has built around her. Among Modesta's children, Prando is the only one whose status as her son cannot be questioned by social rules, and yet he is also the only one who attempts to rebel against his mother.

How distant is Modesta's interpretation of motherhood from what is traditionally considered as the maternal role in Italian literature and society? She never conforms to

> the archetype of the powerful, self-sacrificial, possessive, suffering, resilient Italian mother, who is the pillar of the family and [who] demands life-long exclusive loyalty

21 See: Muraro (1991), Zamboni (1996), Cavarero (2007).

and affection from her children in exchange for her devotion (Giorgio, 2002:120).[22]

By breaking the mould of the patriarchal mother, Modesta categorically rejects the idea of motherhood as a sacrifice to be compensated with unlimited filial devotion. Her uncommon attitude is evident from the very beginning, when, upon giving birth, she does not describe it as a blissful idealisation in which the mother is ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of her child. Her childbirth is rather depicted as "una lotta a morte", a fight to the death against an enemy:

> Non era soltanto una fatica, come aveva pensato. Era una lotta a morte che si scatenava dentro come se il corpo, prima integro, si fosse diviso in due, e una parte lottasse per mangiarsi l'altra. [...] Il suo corpo lottava con l'altro corpo [...] Era lì il nemico, in quel masso che batteva per uscire dalla prigione, e vivere a costo di lacerare, distruggere il suo corpo che, anche se preparato, non ce la faceva a espellere quel nemico per non soccombere [...] (121).
> […] Doveva spingerlo a uscire quell'estraneo già forte di una sua volontà di vita autonoma (122).

Despite the dramatic vivacity of this somewhat poetic description of childbirth, it bears no trace of stereotyped images of the mother-child idealised relationship. On the contrary, it is a struggle for life ("una parte lottava per mangiarsi l'altra") between two distinct human beings, both determined to survive at the expenses of the other. The maternal body is a jail, "una prigione", the body of the child is "un masso che batteva per uscire." The repeated use of words semantically related to the military field (*nemico*, *lotta mortale*, *distruggere*, *soccombere*) unequivocally strengthens the reader's conviction that Modesta does not for a minute embrace the idea of motherhood as a form of self-annihilation.

The dismissal of the patriarchal notion of motherhood goes well beyond a rejection of the maternal self-sacrificial attitude. Modesta presents herself as a non-gendered parental figure, in that she acts both as a mother and as a father, moving beyond stereotyped notions of masculine and feminine.[23] As I have already evidenced in Chapter 1, Butler's theory on gender performativity

22 See also: A.Bravo, in *Storia della Maternità*, ed. M.D'Amelia, 1997: 139-40.

23 I draw the notions of femininity and masculinity from the critique developed by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Judith Butler (1990, 1993 and 2004) and Jessica Benjamin (1988). According to de Beauvoir, there is no universal definition of femininity. Providing a crucial insight into the dialectical nature of the relationship between male and female, the philosopher tackles the way in which, in a human civilisation that has historically been male-dominated, males have sought at all costs to distinguish themselves from females in a process that has been termed 'othering.' In the introduction to the first volume of *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir explains how woman is accordingly "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her" (16), insofar as man discursively constructs woman as his binary opposite. She is the "incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute, - she is the Other" (16). In short, humanity is "male and man defines woman not in

(1990, 2004 and 2004a) provides a useful paradigm to interpret Modesta's disruptive behaviour as a parent. In fact, Butler considers gender as an act rather than a given condition (2004: 1-2). As long as gender is a performance, or in Butler's words, a doing rather than a being, (2-3) Modesta seems to perform her acts in a way that does not entirely match either gender, but which occasionally belongs to both. If gender is performative, the act of parenting, being deeply grounded in gender roles, is performative too. As a consequence, Modesta performs paternal or maternal behaviours according to her priorities at a particular time, regardless of gender roles and socially expected parental patterns. Anticipating Butler's definition of gender, Sapienza shows that masculinity and femininity are cultural constructions, or, in her words, "mestieri,"[24] that a person can learn and dismiss according to their own liking. In other words, the maternal role that Modesta embodies is not necessarily "feminised", but open to different interpretations.

Modesta provides nurture and care, which is supposedly a maternal behaviour,[25] but she also represents normativity and establishes rules, which conforms to a paternal behaviour. The nurturing function of motherhood keeps pace with the normative function of fatherhood, such as imposing and enforcing rules, creating limits and holding power. She breast-feeds her only biological son Prando, regardless of all the conventions that dictate against this for a noble woman and regardless of Beatrice's disapproval, but she is also the one who arranges for him to leave home when it becomes clear that there is no more room for him in her house. Modesta comforts her children but she is also the one who confronts them, controls the finances of the family, establishes sanctions and decides when it is time for them to part company with her. Modesta's gender ambiguity and gender-neutral parenting style perfectly meet, and somehow compensate for, the needs of a family whose legal father, Ippolito, lives in a permanent state of minority and confinement.

5. Maternal desires, sexuality and the disruption of sexual hierarchies.

If we move beyond an analysis of Modesta's behaviours as a parent, we find that she always interprets gender roles as fluid, transitional, unfixed. Modesta performs a "feminine" role by being a tender, protective and loving mother, a devoted sister and friend, full of attention and compassion. However, she also assumes postures which are traditionally considered as masculine. For example, she slaps Beatrice when she is childish and whimsical, she confronts Prando's excess of pride and

herself but as relative to him (15). De Beauvoir unmasks the contribution made by biology, history and psychoanalysis to the formulation of the myth of the "Eternal Feminine"; that is, an impossible ideal used to deny individuality to women and to trap them into stereotyped images (such as the mother, the virgin, the whore, the motherland, nature, etc.).

24 This definition appears in the unpublished manuscript of *Lettera Aperta*. Quoted in Ross (8-9).

25 For the maternal and paternal roles, I draw my definitions from Simone de Beauvoir, (1949), vol II, *Formation:* 38; I also consider the work of Rich (1976), Muraro (1991), Butler (2004).

turns Mattia away. As the head of the family, Modesta is the one who tacitly approves the revenge against the fascists after they have beaten Carlo to death, but she is also the one who puts an end to the bloodbath. To Carmine's great astonishment, Modesta decides to smoke a pipe like him, mimicking his “male” gestures. On many occasions Modesta remarks on her double belonging in terms of gender, for instance defining herself “mezzo caruso e mezzo maredda” (201), half boy, half girl, or declaring to her son “in fondo, sono un po' uomo anch'io” (373).

Modesta's journey towards freedom and self-fulfilment, which qualifies the novel, in feminist terms, as a novel of self-discovery (Felski, 1989), begins with an apprenticeship. The experience of the rape at the hands of her father clarifies to Modesta the dichotomy implicit in gendered roles. In her journey, the relationship with Carmine is a watershed in relation to Modesta's rejection of gendered roles and the hierarchy they imply. Atypically, this older man is sweet, passionate, patient, and, above all, ready to understand his partner and her needs. In his attitude there is something that challenges the stereotyped idea of masculinity and femininity, an attitude that he soon passes on to Modesta. When they first make love, Carmine is surprised by her ignorance: “Niente vi insegnano le vostre madri” (109). Later on, she reiterates Carmine's statement when she addresses the same words to Carlo: “Ma proprio non v'insegnano niente le vostre madri? infatti, non insegnano niente né a noi né a voi” (163). Reversing the roles, it is now Modesta who tries to teach Carlo to freely express his sexual desires. The same question is asked, in a completely different context, to Inès, so as to unmask Inès' fake ingenuity: “Ma proprio non vi insegnano niente le vostre madri?” (189). As happens with Gaia and Leonora, Modesta manipulates what she has learnt from Carmine. Furthermore, here she appropriates the role and words of a man, demonstrating once again that gendered roles are reversible.

The consequence is that, if masculinity and femininity fade, the power structure connected to the sexual hierarchy is also destined to dissolve. In Chapter 1, I have already examined Benjamin's theory on gender domination (1988). This structure is not inevitable: although deeply rooted in the psyche, it can be modified. According to Benjamin, masculinity and femininity are associated with positions of master and slave in a process that begins with the mother-child relationship and evolves into adult eroticism. The structure of domination begins as a “conflict between dependence and independence in infant life” and then turns into “the opposites of power and surrender in adult sexual life” (8). However, Benjamin suggests that this is not necessarily always the case. Anticipating Benjamin's thesis, Modesta realises that masculinity and femininity are not a destiny, but just the effect of social norms that can be overturned: “In un lampo capii che cosa era quello che chiamano destino: una volontà inconsapevole di continuare quella che per anni ci hanno insinuato, imposto, ripetuto essere la sola giusta strada da seguire” (122-3). In the same year in which *L'Arte*

della Gioia's was completed, Rich refers to the patriarchal structure of domination as something that "has never been actively challenged and has been so universal as to seem a law of nature" (1976: 56). Yet, through the extraordinary adventure of Modesta, who gradually rejects the master-slave structure implicit in gendered behaviours and assumes an active, liberated role, Sapienza poses a very real challenge to this alleged "law of nature."

While investigating women's participation in their own submission (9), Benjamin's psychoanalytical theory opens the possibility for women to break the mould of a hierarchical sexual order by rejecting and overturning the structure of domination. This is precisely what Modesta enacts with Carmine. In their case, the initial male-dominated relationship, according to Benjamin's psychoanalytical paradigm, evolves gradually toward a balanced gender polarity, where self-assertion and mutual recognition "constitute the poles of this delicate balance" (12) and stereotypical roles dressed as 'destiny' fade away.

Following her relationship with Carmine, Modesta's attitude towards gender domination has definitely shifted. Now she is able to consciously refuse a sexually subordinate role. She fully accomplishes her evolution with Mattia, the first lover she relates to as a mature, emancipated woman. In the course of their relationship, although she is determined to fulfil her sexual desires, she does not allow these desires to destroy what matters even more to her, that is, her freedom. When she realises that Mattia wants to impose a social role on her, she does not hesitate to dismiss him because of the structure of domination implicit in his love: "Quelle prove non erano che le consuete corde di seta per legare, dopo, più saldamente" (241). After dismantling the gender polarity implicit in conventional heterosexual relationships, Sapienza challenges other taboos in relation to the female body and sexuality.

Modesta's ambiguous approach to gender begins during her childhood, when her idea of femininity is modelled on the only *specimina* she knows, that is, her mother and sister:

> Se [Tina] aveva vent'anni ed era femmina, tutte le femmine a vent'anni dovevano sicuramente diventare come lei o come la mamma […] La nostra mamma non rideva mai e anche questo perché era femmina, sicuramente. Ma anche se non rideva mai e non aveva i denti, io speravo di diventare come lei; almeno era alta […] e aveva i capelli neri. Tina non aveva neanche quello (6).

From what she can see, being a female is not attractive. By dint of her limited early experience, Modesta equates femininity with passivity, hopelessness and silence, and masculinity with discovery, curiosity and pleasure. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a girl she despises femininity

and shows admiration for men, such as Tuzzu, Tuzzu's father and her own father:

> Ecco con chi mi aveva generato mia madre. Mi piaceva parlare e ridere con lui. Né la mamma né Tina parlavano mai. Ora con lui avrei parlato, invece di andare a sfogarmi col vento come avevo fatto sempre (11).

She admires masculine women too, like Gaia. According to Modesta's early memories, Gaia was strong and powerful like a man, and Modesta wants to imitate her precisely for this reason: “Io non sarei stata una donnetta. Come la principessa volevo diventare, quella sì che era una donna forte e volitiva come un uomo” (61). When Modesta becomes Principessa, the same kind of observations are directed to her. For instance, when other people want to show respect and appreciation to Modesta, they tell her that she should have been a man: “Voscenza principessa, se mi posso permettere, voi uomo dovevate nascere” (131).

Initially, Modesta accepts the devaluation of women demanded by the domination structure as a matter of fact. As she admits, it is something that “avevo sottovalutato, o meglio, accettato come qualcosa di naturale” (246). Gradually, she realises that gendered roles are vessels of women's oppression. When Bambolina is born, Modesta understands how deep-rooted is the belittling of women implicit in stereotyped femininity. To her great disappointment, she finds traces of this sexist attitude not only in contemporary society in general, but also among her closest relatives and friends. She is horrified by Beatrice's desperation at having given birth to a girl, and by Mattia's pitiful words for the parents who did not have a boy: “Peccato! M'immagino tuo cognato” (246).

Now she recalls all the contempt she has witnessed from women towards women: her mother, (15), Leonora (20), Beatrice, (82-3) and, above all, Gaia, who rejected her femininity and despised women as a compromise to keep her power: “Con voi donne non si sa mai: patti chiari e inimicizia eterna” (182). However, it is Beatrice's disappointment, as a mother of a newborn daughter, that elicits Modesta's meditation on women's lack of self-esteem, pushing her to re-examine the past:

> Non la voglio odiare, ma quel bugiarda[26] che da giorni e giorni mi perseguita mi costringe a riandare al passato, a riesumare dolorosamente tutte le frasi di madre Leonora, di mia madre, frasi che avevo preferito seppellire con i loro corpi morti. Ma non seppellisci nessuno finché non hai capito sino in fondo quello che dicevano. E cosa dicevano? La donna è nemica della donna come e quanto l'uomo (245-6).

From this moment on Modesta becomes pitiless in her denunciation of women's participation in

26 When Modesta tries to convince the new-mother that giving birth to a baby girl is not less valuable than giving birth to a boy, Beatrice does not believe her, and calls Modesta (who instead gave birth to a boy) “bugiarda”, that is, liar.

their own belittiling. Having experienced this lack of mutual solidarity, or what she calls “insano disprezzo”, she is determined to break this chain of devaluation and self-hatred. Modesta articulates her rejection at two different levels. She herself breaks the mould of gendered construction by adopting postures that belong to both roles when she deems them relevant and appropriate, and she teaches her children to do the same. Modesta is profoundly aware that these roles are imposed on children mainly through education. Therefore, she elaborates her gender-neutral style of parenting and strongly opposes what she calls “corazza di doveri e false certezze” for young boys, and “corazze di seta” for girls (343). This is evident, for instance, when she realises that Stella expects a female mode of behaviour from Bambolina: “Secondo loro Bambolina a cinque anni dovrebbe già muoversi diversamente, stare composta, tenere gli occhi bassi, per coltivare in sé la signorina di domani” (265). Modesta's ambiguous gender performance and her uncommon parenting style, therefore, are consequential to her rejection of masculinity and femininity as social constructions. Modesta is aware of gender normativity. Although done with a touch of humour, she uncompromisingly denounces the societal constraints that aim to reduce women's freedom. “Il pallore e la fragilità non sono in fondo che fili sottilissimi per imbrigliare e domare la natura femminile” (140) she explains to Carlo, when she wants to get a tan, in defiance of the stereotyped paleness expected of women. While she is overtly speaking about the freedom of enjoying the sun, the discourse equally applies to sexual behaviours, since being pale and fragile reinforces the passivity of the stereotypical female role.

In her disawoval of stereotyped notions of femininity Modesta also lays the foundation for her full-hearted appreciation of women and her unfailing support for their freedom. In this regard, the maternal authority Modesta has gained is crucial. She knows that “solo la donna può aiutare la donna” (265) in her struggle for self-fulfilment and freedom. Therefore, Modesta's main preoccupation is to help other women prosper and grow. By using her authority, wealth and social power, Modesta fully embodies that idea of temporary, supportive and non-patriarchalised motherhood that she had experienced only in part as an adoptive daughter herself.

In Modesta's interpretation of genders there is no hierarchical distinction between femininity and masculinity. On the one hand she does not despise femininity *per se*, as other women such as Gaia, Beatrice, Leonora and her natural mother did. On the other hand she does not limit her behaviours to gender expectations. In other words, Modesta is proud of being a woman and shows her love and admiration for other women (unlike Gaia, Leonora and Joyce), yet she does not confine herself within the narrow boundaries of femininity, as Beatrice did. This means that she may adopt a few masculine behaviours, as a “mestiere,” but she firmly refuses to ape men in order to prove herself exceptional. From her perspective both the feminised women (Beatrice and Leonora), and the

masculinised women (Gaia and Joyce), embody and validate the binary logic of genders, from which Modesta chooses to deviate. Gaia represented an attractive model but, to be successful, she stifled in herself all that is considered traditionally feminine. Modesta perceives this renounciation as a defeat. Not only does Modesta reject most of Gaia's behaviours, such as her mistrust of women and her obsession for abstract, 'male' values like pride, reputation and wealth. She also understands that, in spite of the apparent difference, both women who comply with gendered roles and women who repress their femininity validate gender hierarchies and reproduce a structure in which the male is always dominant. A similar consideration applies to the other masculinised woman of the novel. By despising her own femininity, Joyce becomes “un essere mutilo” (349). By embracing both her natures, Modesta disrupts and annihilates the polarisation between genders.[27]

Where does this subversive approach to gender and sexuality come from? Modesta discovers sexual pleasure early in life. Simultaneously, she realises that gender expectations deny women the right to express their desires. When the two clash, Modesta does not repress her desires and never conforms to externally constructed roles. Here the meaning of the title becomes clear. The art of joy refers to Modesta's journey towards the fulfilment of her desires (for love, for happiness and for freedom), which only are the qualities she considers to be the source of real joy, as opposed to the quest for money, power or fame.

In her search for freedom and happiness Modesta is always driven by the same keen and untamed curiosity. Because of her uninhibited nature, Modesta even experiences the rape at the hands of her father with some fear but an equal measure of curiosity. From this perspective her father's abuse is more a disappointment than a trauma (12-4). Later on, Leonora tries in vain to stifle Modesta's sexual curiosity, after having repressed her own (18). The outcome of this attempt is that the young Modesta no longer trusts the Mother Superior and develops an uncommon shrewdness in controlling her own emotions and their expression, while she learns how to protect herself from external pressure by concealing her feelings and thoughts.

As an adult Modesta does not want to repress her own desires. Unlike other women in the novel (her biological mother, Leonora, Gaia and Joyce,) who are trapped in a patriarchal system of values, Modesta refuses to be an object. In fact, an outstanding aspect of Modesta, both as a mother and as a woman, is that she is a subject of desire, so that her most disruptive legacy to her daughters is the relationship between the female body and sexuality.

27 Modesta's awareness of her gender ambiguity mirrors to some extent the author's biographical experience. However, in the case of the writer, the uncertain approach to masculinity and femininity as socially constructed roles is more problematic. According to Ross, most of Sapienza's autobiographical work “challeng[es] the assumption that biological sex inevitably leads to a predestined gender identity.” (10) As Ross argues, Sapienza “oscillates between espousing an ambiguous gender identity, a form of female masculinity, and seeming to support discourses of sexual difference feminism. (3)

Investigating the relationship between gender, sexual desire and normative social roles, Butler (2004) questions the power of society to shape a person's desires according to hegemonic norms, associated with determined sexual behaviours. The result of societal influence on individual sexuality is what she calls, drawing on the term used by Claude Levy Strauss, compulsory heterosexuality (121). When personal desires differ from expected sexual behaviours, it may occur that "a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a liveable life" (1). Borrowing Butler's words, Modesta is fully able to "persevere in a liveable life." She loves women and men without distinction, moving swiftly from one relationship to another regardless of any prejudice, immune to compulsory heterosexuality, driven only by her affection and desires.

If Modesta and her offspring happily escape this unfortunate influence, other characters of the novel do not. A troubled relationship with sexuality affects heterosexual characters, and becomes devastating when it is found in homosexual individuals. Carlo, despite being in love with Modesta, is prevented from having a satisfying relationship with her by his conservative upbringing, which inculcated in his mind stereotyped ideas of women's sexual passivity. When faced with Modesta's vitality and desires, Carlo is not able to cope and their sexual bond is doomed to end. Despite all societal conditionings affecting her self-perception, Beatrice accepts her homosexual side, by belittling its importance: "Non è che pensi che sia peccato? Che male c'è? Tanto siamo femmine tutte e due" (79). On the contrary, in the case of Joyce, the clash between her homosexual desires and the societal imposition of compulsory heterosexuality leads her to self-destructive behaviours and, finally, to the end of Modesta's love for her.

Joyce is the most paradigmatic example of this friction between natural desires and societal norms. She feels the irresistible pressure of compulsory heterosexuality and refers to homosexual relationships as abnormal. According to Joyce, homosexuality is a deviation from nature, "una deviazione dalle regole sane della natura" (349) to be corrected through psychoanalytical therapy. In vain, Modesta defends everyone's right to love freely, whether it be women or men, unmasking the contradiction in Joyce's behaviour. In spite of Modesta's attempts to transmit a healthier idea of sexuality to her lover, Joyce falls prey to the same prejudices surrounding the alleged abnormality of homosexual behaviours that Butler (2004) investigates three decades later.

The discourse about sexuality calls the maternal function into question once again. It is not a coincidence that the most sorrowful source of Joyce's self-contempt stems from the rejection she experienced from her own mother. Many feminist scholars shed light on the significant influence held by the mother in the development of the daughter's identity.[28] In the case of Joyce, it is clear

28 See the chapter *Motherhood and Daughterhood* in A. Rich, *Of Woman Born* (1976). See also: M. Hirsch, *The*

that she lacked an essential element of the mother-child relationship, something that Benjamin calls "mutual recognition" (1988: 23). As we have seen earlier, the lack of recognition undermines a person's self-esteem and can make his/her life seem worthless. A dialogue that occurs between the two lovers highlights the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in relation to sexual identity and develops the idea of motherhood as a potentiality that can be developed in different ways. While Joyce states that she is not a woman, (349) Modesta reminds her that her refusal of her femininity has turned her into "un essere mutilo" (349), who compensates for her self-inflicted mutilation as men do, that is, by replacing procreation with power (353).

The account of Joyce's unhappy relationship with her biological mother is counter-pointed by a discussion on the upbringing of two girls in the family, Bambù and Mela, who are in love with each other. Thinking of herself as a "malata" (353) and as "un essere deviato" (349), Joyce would like to prevent Bambù from being "corrupted" by Mela, afraid that, as a lesbian, the girl will become a worthless person (347). On the contrary, Modesta refutes Joyce's view, reminding her that it is society, and people like Joyce, who elicit in homosexual individuals the idea of being abnormal[29]. While Joyce is hopelessly affected by the pain of her maternal rejection, Modesta is determined to play her role as temporary and supportive mother until it is no longer necessary. Once again, she wants to transmit a positive model and prevent invalidating prejudices from affecting the younger generation.[30] Not only does Modesta's behaviour as a mother find an echo in the words of theorists and thinkers of Sapienza's time: "A woman who has respect and affection for her own body [...] will transmit to her daughter that a woman's body is a good and healthy place to live" (Rich: 245). Her outstanding ability to freely express her sexual desire anticipates, in fiction, Irigaray's theories (1991). After explaining the difference between the "archaic love of the mother and love for women-sisters" (44), the Belgian philosopher contends that "this love [for women-sisters] is necessary if we are not to remain servants of the phallic cult, objects used by and exchanged between men […] the situation in which we have always been placed. It is important that we discover the singularity of our *jouissance*" (45).[31] The pursuit of this individual enjoyment is what

Mother/Daughter Plot, (1989) and Diotima, *L'Ombra della Madre*, (2007).

29 Adrienne Rich provides a definition of what a "normal" woman is supposed to be in a patriarchal and heterosexual context: "a normal woman, that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards men." (219)

30 In this particular circumstance, fiction crosses paths with the biographical experience of the author. In her semi-autobiographical novel *Lettera Apert*a Sapienza recalls a similar episode occurring to her. When Sapienza's mother found out the homosexual relationship between Goliarda and her half-sister Nica, she slapped her daughter and banished Nica from their home. Maria Giudice's position on this episode coincides with Joyce's in the novel. Drawing from a painful personal experience, Sapienza seems to re-write and re-shape her own biography through her heroine. This uninterrupted overflowing from life to writing and vice-versa has been widely analysed by Ross (2012: 16-9).

31 Maria Teresa Maenza's article "Fuori dall'ordine Simbolico della Madre: Goliarda Sapienza e Luce Irigaray" tackles the correspondences between Sapienza's autobiographical works and Irigaray's theory (2012).

characterises Modesta's life and autobiographical account from the first pages, where she discovers sexual pleasure, to the very end of the novel, where the narrator describes Modesta's senile orgasm.

Interestingly, the novel advocates for homosexual desires, but only represents female homosexuality (409). Consistent with her female-centred point of view, Sapienza theoretically supports everybody's right to enjoy love and sex the way it best suits them, but in her novel she only provides examples of female same sex relationship.[32]

6. Multiple persona: fragmenting and recomposing the notion of a unified subject.

If "the critical reworking of apparently constitutive gender norms" (Butler, 1993: X) operated by Sapienza weakens the notion of a monolithic self, the narrative structure of the novel too enhances the perception of a self that is fragmented. The narration begins with the protagonist's first memory followed by a statement that qualifies the novel as an autobiographical account: "Lasciamo questo mio primo ricordo così com'è: non mi va di fare supposizioni o di inventare. Voglio dirvi quello che è stato senza alterare niente" (5). This *incipit* clarifies who is the narrating subject and from what perspective the events are narrated. The circular structure of the novel reinforces this impression. The narration ends with an invitation: "Racconta, Modesta, racconta" (511), which seems to allude to the story we have just heard from Modesta's voice. However, in spite of its manifest autobiographical approach, the narrating voice departs from traditional notions of the unified subject in that the narratorial voice is multiple and discontinuous.

First and foremost, the narrator is split into two different entities. The speaking voice switches constantly from the first to the third person, both representing Modesta's point of view. This double-focused voice clearly belongs to the protagonist, even when it refers the events of Modesta's life in the third person. The effect is that the narration oscillates between two perspectives, one internal and one external:

> Era meglio stare ferma con gli occhi chiusi, ma il sole *mi* spacca la testa e devo aprire gli occhi: quel bagliore non è il sole ma il lume a petrolio che la mamma aveva acceso per lavorare, tanto tempo prima, quando ancora quell'uomo nudo che dormiva ora accanto a *lei* non c'era […] (15 *emphasis mine*).
>
> Quando *aprii* gli occhi la gabbia di vetro era ancora piena di luce. […] Appoggiando la mano alla parete per ritrovare il velluto, invece di quella stoffa morbida *sentì* qualcosa di liscio come la seta […] (52 *emphasis mine*).

32 During her crucial discussion with Joyce Modesta mentions a man who was in love with another man before marrying a woman, but this is the only trace of male homosexuality in the text.

As these examples show, the verbs and pronouns immediately switch from the first to the third person during the flow of the narration, without interruption. In spite of the shift ("mi... lei"; "aprii.. sentì") the subject of the narration is always Modesta. The oscillation between a first and third-person account occurs also in Sapienza's autobiographical works[33]. In the non-fictional texts the split is a way to express the author's dislocation from herself. As Ross maintains:

> By staging these discontinuities and deploying multiple perspectives Sapienza evokes the different connected and disconnected layers and perspectives that constitute the self, and through which it is constituted (6).

In *L'Arte della Gioia* this effect is less destabilising and, as Fortini suggests (107), it rather signals the importance of the event narrated for the protagonist.

The split between the two main narrating voices adds to the complexity of the novel and to the construction of the protagonist's character. Other novels dealing with the mother-daughter relationship, such as those of Ramondino, Sanvitale and Cerati, present the alternation between two modes of narration (first/third person). However, in their cases, the double-voiced account serves the purpose of adopting a dual focus on the events. What is new here is that the two narrating voices, one immediately following the other, represent only one character's point of view.

Besides the use of the double-focused account, the novel challenges the notion of a coherent subject in other ways. In Modesta's first-person account, a multiplicity of voices intertwines and overlaps through the protagonist's internal dialogue. Modesta constantly converses with men and women who belonged to her 'apprenticeship' in life and who become part of her multiple self: Tuzzu, Mimmo, Carmine and Carlo speak to her and through her, as do Gaia, Leonora and sometimes Beatrice, Nina and Stella. For instance, when Gaia decides that Modesta has to marry Ippolito, Modesta congratulates herself because she had manipulated Gaia to push her towards that decision:

> […] quelle urla [di Gaia] m'avevano fatto salire alle guance un calore e una pace mai provata prima. Come dopo un lavoro fatto proprio "in modo fino", vero Mimmo? Crogiolandomi in quella pace, cercavo Mimmo su pei muri tappezzati di seta […] Un lavoro proprio ben fatto, vero Mimmo? "Eh sì, principessina" […] Mimmo aveva sempre ragione (97).

It seems that Modesta is talking to Mimmo, but she is not. Mimmo, the gardener at the convent

33 In *Le Certezze del Dubbio* (2007) and in *Io, Jean Gabin* (2010) the first-person account sometimes switches to a third-person account, although to a lesser extent than in *L'Arte della Gioia*.

she has just left, is not a real interlocutor here, but the reflection of one of her earlier identifications. In the past, Mimmo played the role of mentor to her, and now Modesta evokes him to assist her in a crucial moment. Once summoned from the past, Modesta's interlocutors become a part of her multiple self.

The multiplication of the narrating voices is carried out through a wide variety of narrative strategies. At some point in the story, the narrating voice overlaps with Beatrice's voice. Through a very traditional literary device, the pages of Beatrice's journal (155-9) are incorporated into the narration and we learn the events of her life from her point of view. However, in spite of this complex multiplicity of voices, the fragmentation of the narrating subject only happens to a limited extent. In fact, Modesta firmly holds the centre of the speaking position.

An interesting effect of Sapienza's multi-focused account is that is gives voice to filial and maternal subjectivities, both of which are embodied by Modesta. Through her complex persona, whose multiple facets form a coherent and yet fragmented subject, Sapienza anticipates the metaphor forged by Marianne Hirsch (1979), insofar as *L'Arte della Gioia* portrays a mother and a daughter who "inhabit the same body […] [and] are the same person speaking with two voices" (199). In Modesta's case, the two voices do not speak simultaneously. Modesta, in fact, dismisses her filial role when she moves toward a maternal position. Nevertheless, she embodies an unprecedented example of a balance between maternal and daughterly subjectivities. By locating the mother's and the daughter's voices in the same character as two voices emanating from the same body, although at different times, Sapienza paves the way for the representation of maternal subjectivity within the mother-daughter trope, as we see in Scego, Parrella and Murgia.

7. Towards a different symbolical horizon?

Aware that in patriarchal society the mother-daughter bond was usually weakened and marginalised because of a lack of symbolic figures of reference, Italian theorists advocated for both a redesigned maternal-filial bond and a new symbolic frame of reference. The practice of *affidamento*, the notion of maternal authority and the claim for a new symbolic order are closely connected to each other. As *affidamento* is deeply intertwined with the notion of authority, likewise the notion of authority leads to a revisited discussion of the symbolic frame of reference. As Zamboni (1995) argues, a person's authority is validated within the symbolic order to which that person belongs (38). This means that in the symbolic order of the father there is no place for maternal authority. Sapienza's novel perfectly illustrates this connection. Gaia, whose power is rooted in a male symbolic order, is a patriarchal mother. Modesta's authority, instead, follows a

matrilineal transmission and, as such, prefigures a female frame of reference.

The invention of a girl killing her mothers is Sapienza's way of subverting the symbolical order of the father and changing it into something more appropriate to the case of women. However, Sapienza does not advocate for a symbolical maternal order, that is, a symmetrical female frame of reference, the binary opposite of patriarchy, as suggested by Italian feminists.[34] In her dismantling of a patriarchal system, Sapienza depicts the symbolic "not as a quasi-permanent structure" (Butler, 1993: 22) to be dissolved (symbolic order of the father) and rebuilt on a different, opposed basis (symbolic order of the mother), but as a more flexible and inclusive structure. Sapienza suggests an evolving symbolic order, something that the scholar and philosopher Butler defines "as a temporalized regulation of signification" (ibid.). While her frame of reference is female, it is not exclusively so. The feminisation of symbolic structures operated by Sapienza counters the traditional representation of women (mothers, daughters and lovers) enmeshed in a male-dominated system. However, unlike the feminist stance, which implies the mutual exclusion of the two symbolic orders and posits for a woman the exclusive belonging to a female frame of reference, (Zamboni, 38) Sapienza's perspective does not necessarily postulate the hegemonic presence of one gender - female or male - to the detriment of the other, but rather a contamination of the two, as her fluid representation of gendered roles demonstrates.[35]

Moreover, the novel makes evident the deep connection between authority, symbolical order and freedom. By making a distinction between authority and power, Muraro (1995) points out the need for women to combine the necessity of authority with their love for freedom within a new symbolic order of the mother. Muraro's invitation to women to conciliate "il bisogno simbolico di autorità con l'amore della libertà" (1) finds a fictional representation in *L'Arte della Gioia*. This kind of freedom is what Dominijanni calls "a freedom *in deed and practice*, an event which is manifested and renewed each time it modifies the social and symbolic order" (2004: 203-4). Modesta is one of the best literary renditions of this freedom "in deed and practice" thanks to her ability to alter the existing social and symbolic order in order to negotiate a liveable space.

If it is true that "the uncontested status of sex within the heterosexual dyad secures the workings of certain symbolic orders", as Butler argues (1993: 16), *L'Arte della Gioia* demonstrates what happens to the symbolic order when the social norms on which it relies are challenged and overturned. As Modesta jeopardises the concepts of gendered roles and normative heterosexuality, so the symbolic order of the father (in which gendered roles and heterosexuality find their main

34 See: Women's Collective Bookstore (1987), Cigarini, (1992), Scarparo (2004).

35 Luce irigaray (2000) advocates for women's and men's parallel subjectivities, which demand mutual recognition and acceptance. However, by postulating "the existence of two subjects of equivalent value and dignity" (140) Irigaray implies that women and men belong to two different symbolic horizons, which is not necessarily what Sapienza's novel suggests.

legitimation) starts falling apart. Unwittingly or not, Modesta realises a “radical re-articulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies (in her case, female bodies) come to matter at all” (1993: 16), while opening new spaces of signification to other tenets of the patriarchal social order. In *L'Arte della Gioia*'s subverted symbolic horizon, the hegemonic male-centred family based on bloodlines is broken apart and gives way to a new conception of kinship and parenthood.

Despite her desire to distance herself from Italian feminism, it is surprising how much Sapienza's position overlaps with that of the sexual difference theorists. Both question the existing social order based on the Law-of-the-Father and its damaging effects on women. Both encourage women to develop alternative kinds of relationship, and namely, a voluntary bond with other women. Borrowing Farnetti's useful oxymoron, it can be argued that a sort of *misoginia amorosa* (92) characterises not only Modesta's behaviours, but also Sapienza's relationship with feminists. In fact, in her deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of bonds between women, the non-biological mother-daughter relationship plays a central role as an alternative type of bond, “which is simultaneously intimate and external, personal and social, which makes a coherent whole of being a woman and having a social existence” (Muraro 1991a: 125).

8. Conclusion

L'Arte della Gioia is Sapienza's attempt to suggest a possible evolution of Italian society toward fairness and equality. Her novel proposes an alternative and appealing version of two of the most pervasive and contested elements of Italian society, such as the institution of the family and the condition of women, both dominated by a patriarchal value system. Having managed to locate herself far from a male-centred space, the protagonist of the novel presents herself as a free woman. As a daughter, as a mother, as a parent, as a lover, her character is a disruptive fictional translation of the most important feminist claims. Through her evolution, Modesta has accomplished a radical socio-symbolic change in the way women perceive themselves and relate to each other. Thanks to her uncontested ability to develop unconventional mother-daughter bonds based on the recognition of maternal authority, she allows women “to find strength, validation and self-affirmation” (Scarparo 2005) and encourage them to challenge established norms and social conditionings. Modesta powerfully presents a fascinating hypothesis of what a woman can be, or should be, outside the Law-of-the-Father, in a “de-patriarchalized” society. While Sapienza's re-articulation of the maternal bond with a daughter excludes biological motherhood, in the following chapter I discuss how in *Oltre Babilonia* Igiaba Scego reappraises the biological bond, through the parallel de-construction and reconstruction of a bond of love between two mother-daughter dyads.

CHAPTER 3.
Intersections of body and narration in Igiaba Scego's cross-cultural investigation of the mother-daughter bond.

"Probably there is nothing in human nature
more resonant with charges than the flow of energy
between two biologically alike bodies,
one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other,
one of which has labored to give birth to the other.
The materials are here for the deepest mutuality
and the most painful estrangement."
(Rich: 226)

Born in Italy to Somali parents, Igiaba Scego (b. 1974) is a writer whose multicultural identity is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for her depiction of most of the female protagonists of her works. In her two short stories "Dismatria" and "Salsicce" (2009), Scego deals with the issue of multiple cultural identities from an exclusively female perspective, while questioning the meaning of such terms as tolerance and integration, acceptance and assimilation. In her first novel *Rhoda* (2004), she investigates how three Somali women of different ages react to the experience of migration and concentrates on how their displacement and their subsequent loss of identity can generate self-destructive behaviour. In the novel I analyse here, *Oltre Babilonia* ('Beyond Babylon', 2008), Scego combines the pain generated by migration and exile with the conflicts inherent in the mother-daughter relationship. Ethnic, cultural and generational dichotomies magnify the intricacies implicit in the mother-daughter tie and single out how deeply this relationship shapes the construction of female identity.

As the epigraph anticipates, biological mother-daughter relationships are at the centre of my investigation in this chapter. While *L'Arte della Gioia*, analysed in Chapter 2, equates biological mothers with bad mothers when they bring daughters into the world, *Oltre Babilonia* hinges on corporeal and biological bonds between women, not exclusively mothers and daughters. The novel presents the reader with two mother-daughter dyads engaged in a dialogue over their multiple differences. The plot of the novel, while mostly set in contemporary Rome, unfolds across three continents (Africa, Latin America and Europe), and presents five narrating voices, one for each

main character: two exiled mothers, Maryam and Miranda, two culturally and physically 'hybrid' daughters, Zuhra and Mar, and one common, marginal father, Elias. Zuhra was born from Elias' marriage to Maryam, Mar from an occasional encounter between Elias and Miranda. Unbeknown to them, Elias is the only point of connection between the two mother-daughter pairs, whose parallel stories cross only at one point in the novel.

The novel begins with Zuhra's decision to write a book as a means to rediscover her own femininity. Simultaneously, each mother feels an urge to disclose her sorrowful - and so far untold - story to her adult daughter. Miranda, an acclaimed poet and intellectual, commits her story of maternal rejection, of traumatic loss and of self-hatred to writing. Born in Argentina to an Italian father and a Portuguese mother, Miranda is a teenager when Videla's dictatorship begins to spread terror among Argentinians. While her brother and friends disappear in the torture chambers, she has an affair with one of the torturers. When her awareness increases, Miranda, sincerely ashamed of her past, abandons her country and moves to Italy. Here she falls pregnant to Elias, and gives birth to Mar. Maryam, instead, records her voice in a sequence of audiotapes.

Born in Somalia, Maryam is an orphan raised by her aunts. At the outbreak of the civil war, Maryam leaves her homeland and joins her husband Elias in Italy. Shortly after her arrival, Elias abandons her. The abandonment precipitates Maryam into a spiral of depression and alcohol abuse. Her addiction makes her unable to look after her small daughter, Zuhra. This sorrowful and untold story is what she is now going to narrate orally. Likewise, Elias, too, tapes his voice in order to deliver the story of his life to the two daughters he has never met.

The desire to create an alternative model of mother-daughter relationship is reminiscent of *L'Arte della Gioia* for its ground-breaking interpretation of the mother-daughter plot. While Sapienza's novel focuses on the empowering role of non-biological, temporary mothers, Scego's renegotiation of the mother-daughter bond centres mainly on biological motherhood. Although bestowing significant importance to various kinds of female relationships, Scego aims at a reappraisal of the bond with the biological mother, without denying its contradictory aspects. In addition, Sapienza's novel brings to the fore the importance of developing a female frame of reference that moves away from that dictated by The-Law-of-the-Father in order to allow women to gain power, authority, freedom and self-respect. Taking over from Sapienza, Scego, too, questions a male-dominated symbolical order and its effects on women's lives.

The position of the daughters in *Oltre Babilonia* is also reminiscent of the novels devoted to the mother-daughter relationship written by Italian women writers during the 1980s and 1990s mentioned in Chapter 1. However, while appropriating some aspects of those novels, Scego pushes the exploration much further. In those narratives the daughter is often in search of an unattainable

mother. As I show in this chapter, instead, *Oltre Babilonia* depicts mothers and daughters caught in the effort of talking to each other. Scego's mothers are represented in the transition from aloofness to benevolence and solidarity, prefiguring the end of that "progeny of unloved daughters" (Giorgio, 122) which has populated Italian literature in the last few decades. In entering into this dialogue involving the mother-daughter trope, Scego brings a new dimension to both the mother's and the daughter's literary representation. On the one hand the author bestowes subjectivity upon those distant, absent and silenced mothers by making them speak with their own voice. On the other hand, Scego's insertion of cultural and ethnic diversities into the mother-daughter tie enriches the dilemma of the daughter, who looks into the maternal mirror and cannot find a reflection of herself.

1. Maternal subjectivity

The multiplicity of voices that characterises *Oltre Babilonia* is organised in a perfectly geometric structure. Framed by a prologue and an epilogue, the narration is articulated in eight chapters. Every chapter contains five sections, one for each character, always presented in the same order: Mar, Zuhra, Miranda, Maryam and Elias. The intersection of the individual narrations (in the form of monologues, streams of consciousness, third-person narrations and first-person accounts) creates the semblance of a dialogue which, at least technically, is not actually a dialogue. In fact, although the characters are addressing each other, they are not aware of the parallelism and simultaneity of their narrations. The complexity of this polyphonic structure places the reader in an interesting position, as the one who knows more than any of the characters. And while narrations intersect, for most of the novel only the reader is aware of this intersection. The dialogues between mothers and daughters finally appear at the end of the novel as the result of these skilfully interwoven threads.

In Scego's novel both mothers speak as subjects. *Oltre Babilonia* seems to accomplish Adalgisa Giorgio's wish that women writers finally "abandon their position as daughters and speak as mothers of adult daughters" (2002: 150). For an adult daughter to give voice to her mother and to speak about (and to) her, is not an easy task for a woman writer.[1] On the contrary, Scego's interpretation of the mother-daughter bond bestows on both figures the same level of dignity by giving subjectivity to each. This parallel subjectivity of mothers and daughters displayed in *Oltre Babilonia* is unusual and disrupts the unbalanced representation of mother-daughter relationships in which one role necessarily engulfs the other, as I have explained in Chapter 1. If the enigma

1 When dealing with the mother-daughter relationship, female-authored narratives bestow subjectivity almost exclusively upon the daughter, as discussed by Benedetti, in her chapter "Struggling with the mother" (2007: 94-113) and by Sambuco (2012). However, an evolution is occurring in most recent texts. As Giorgio argues, "the wide-spread practice of incorporating the mother's voice into the daughter's narrative attests to the commitment of contemporary women writers to hear or imagine the mother's point of view" (2002: 150). This aspect is widely discussed in Chapter 1.

represented by female subjectivity in relation to the mother-daughter bond is a dynamic combination of sameness and difference, of belonging and loss, of fusion and estrangement, then it can be argued that in this novel “il rapporto madre-figlia smette di essere il luogo e il tempo della reciproca dipendenza ed entra nel luogo e nel tempo della reciproca soggettività” (Ravasi Bellocchio 157). *Oltre Babilonia* stages two mothers in the very act of trying to establish a connection with their adult daughters. Mothers engage in a story-telling that, on the one hand, “breaks the chain” of self-hatred, resentment and silence and, on the other hand, allows the weakened bond with their neglected daughters to be retied as they move towards “il tempo della reciproca soggettività.”

Compared to the prevailing representation of the maternal figure in contemporary Italian women writers' novels, *Oltre Babilonia* displays a significant evolution. While initially following the path opened by authors such as Sanvitale, Ramondino and Ferrante, Scego manages to move beyond their stance. These authors portray daughters who attempt to “(re)create their history in search of a female genealogy” (Luciano: 102). Conversely, in *Oltre Babilonia* it is the mother who takes on the task of reconstructing the female genealogy for her daughter, finally ridding herself of her traditional passivity. Reversing the traditional pattern of the daughter in quest of the mother, Maryam and Miranda offer the narration as a gift to their daughters. Therefore, for Zuhra and Mar the dialogue with the mother is no longer an unattainable goal, and the much hoped for reconciliation with their mothers in flesh and blood - and not just with their ghosts - becomes an available option.

The structure of the novel is reminiscent of the genre that Rita Felski defines as a “feminist realist novel of self discovery” (1989), that is, a text tracing “a clear developmental plot in which the heroine moves from a state of alienation to a discovery of female identity through a process of separation from a male-defined values” (83). I have already analysed how a similar process occurs in *L'Arte della Gioia*. In *Oltre Babilonia* this structure is amplified through several parallel paths in which mothers and daughters move from a world of male violence towards a female frame of reference. The most striking aspect of this process of self-discovery is the centrality of maternal subjectivity. Not only does the novel give voice to two mothers and their adult daughters, it also represents maternal voices as dominant, in that the voice of the mother finds expression through writing, through oral accounts, it ignites the father's narration, and it finally seeps through to the daughter's voice and intermingles with hers.

2. Narrative strategies

Self-narration is a key feature of *Oltre Babilonia*. With the exception of Mar, all the protagonists engage with accounts of their own stories, although to a different extent. In their recent study on contemporary Italian literature dealing with the representation of migrants, Maria Cristina Mauceri and Maria Grazia Negro (2009) note how self-narration, achieved through a "narratore autodiegetico," (301) characterises the early texts written by migrant writers, while the first-person account tends to be replaced with a more neutral third-person one in more recent texts. *Oltre Babilonia* presents both kind of narrators. Its five narrating voices articulate a complex combination in which "narratore autodiegetico" and "narratore eterodiegetico" overlap, cross and glide into one another.

The intersection of narratives that characterises the structure of the novel recalls what Adriana Cavarero, in her essay *Tu che Mi Guardi, Tu che Mi Racconti* (1997), defines as "filosofia della narrazione." Cavarero contends that our identity is constituted by a 'narratable self' that postulates the other as necessary for our story to be told.[2] Biographical narration leads to the construction of personal identity, which, in Cavarero's view, is not an innate quality but is rather the outcome of a relational practice. Following Hanna Arendt's elaborations, Cavarero maintains that we gain an understanding of ourselves only through the words and gaze of the other: "Il significato dell'identità è sempre affidato al racconto altrui della propria storia" (31). In compliance with the philosophy of narration, Zuhra, Maryam, Miranda and Elias engage in a first-person account which is simultaneously 'biographical' and 'auto-biographical'.[3] Their intertwining narrations create a mirror effect in which each narrator represents the necessary Other, insofar as every 'autobiographical' account soon becomes the story-telling of someone else's life. In Cavarero's words, this situation is called 'the paradox of Ulysses': "Esso consiste nella situazione per cui qualcuno riceve la propria storia dalla narrazione altrui. Così accade, appunto, a Ulisse presso i Feaci" (27-8).

The fact that the narrating voices address each other implies that the characters can understand who they are only when someone else takes on the task of telling them their own story. This is particularly evident in the case of Elias who, unlike the other narrators, is more a function of the narrative strategy than an autonomous character. Elias decides to be just a voice to his daughters:

> Ecco, Zuhra, sto iniziando la mia storia. Che è un po' la tua. Non sono stato un padre per te. Sono quasi un estraneo [...] Anzi, visto che ci sono, ti racconterò tutto come se non

2 "Lo statuto relazionale dell'identità postula infatti sempre l'altro come necessario" (Cavarero, 1997: 38).

3 By using the terms 'biographical' and 'auto-biographical' here I do not refer to biography and autobiography as genres, but to the fact that the autodiegetic narrators in *Oltre Babilonia* engage with the account of a story that is simultaneously their own story and the story of other characters, that is, Others.

fosse la mia storia, ma come se ti raccontassi la storia di un altro. In terza persona (63).

Elias' decision to speak in the third person appears as a deliberate distancing ("come se non fosse la mia storia"), and underlines his being a vehicle of someone else's story. As a narrator, Elias consciously shifts the focus of his account from self-narration ("la mia storia") to the narration of the stories of other characters. His narration concentrates on what happened in Somalia, giving pre-eminence to the female side of his family. Elias does not speak of himself and of what happened to him outside Somalia. As he states, his story is, in fact, Zuhra's story ("è un po' la tua"). Only a small part of his adult life is reported by Maryam and Miranda and is revealed to the reader through each daughter's conception.

The relationship between narrators and protagonists in *Oltre Babilonia* is partly reminiscent of Ulysses and the bard at the Phaeacians' court, as analysed by Cavarero. In the same way that Ulysses listens to Demodochus narrating his story, which is "una trama impalpabile che va in cerca del suo racconto, ossia, del suo narratore,"(37) the narrating voices of *Oltre Babilonia*, and notably that of Elias, likewise perform the task of narrating a story in which protagonists and interlocutors mostly overlap. Each account begins as an 'autobiographical' account and then develops into the story-telling of other characters in what Cavarero defines as an interplay between the self and the other:

> Come in un impossibile gioco di specchi, il sé è qui infatti l'attore e lo spettatore, il narratore e l'ascoltatore in una sola persona. [...] In questo senso, facendo coincidere l'*auto*, il *bios* e il *graphein*, il sé conquista davvero un'unità assoluta e autosufficiente. [...] Esponibile e insieme narrabile, l'esistente si costituisce infatti sempre nella relazione all'altro" (Cavarero 57).

Zuhra and Mar, whose narrations have no specified interlocutor, provide a glimpse of their mothers' biography through their own stories. In turn, they receive from Miranda, Maryam and Elias the "racconto altrui della propria storia" which is necessary to the construction of the self.

In the case of Mar, Scego's narrative strategy is slightly different. Her part of the story is narrated in the third person by a narrator who assumes Mar's point of view. Every now and then, the internal focalisation shifts from Mar's to Miranda's point of view:

> Quante volte ancora Mar voleva essere partorita? Miranda sapeva in cuor suo che Mar non le apparteneva [...] Sapeva di essere una madre sbagliata. Sapeva di doversi aspettare il peggio sempre e comunque (77).

Miranda's lack of self-esteem as a mother emerges mostly through Mar's account. The daughter's words reveal to the reader that Miranda thinks of herself as a "madre sbagliata" and blames herself for Mar's troubles ("sapeva di doversi aspettare il peggio sempre e comunque"). Sometimes, this change in perspective occurs unexpectedly, within the same paragraph, so that is is difficult to decipher when Mar's perspective gives way to Miranda's:

> Efficienza pura. Ecco cos'era la madre di Mar. Non a caso aveva venduto migliaia di copie dei suoi cinque libri di poesia. In un paese, l'Italia, in cui i lettori di qualsiasi cosa scarseggiano, vendere tanta poesia era follia organizzata. Lei andava fiera di questo successo e diceva sempre che 'il duro lavoro alla fine paga sempre'. Era convinta che questo fosse possibile anche con *quella figlia tanto strana* [...] Con *lei aveva fallito* (29 *emphasis mine*).

As Benedetti has observed, in the fictional representation of the mother-daughter bond "rhetorical choices serve as powerful indicators of the complexity of the relationship" (110). By shifting the point of view from Mar ("era una follia organizzata") to Miranda ("con lei aveva fallito") and vice-versa, the author makes the narrating subject appear "divided, multiple," one who becomes "the mirror of other lives and other stories" (Wilson 3). In some passages, the perspective could belong to both characters. When the narrator refers to Mar as "quella figlia tanto strana", whose voice is this? It can express both Miranda's frustration as a mother or Mar's devalued self-perception as a daughter.[4]

In Chapter 1 I have discussed how the incorporation of fragments of the mother's voice in the daughter's narration is a recurrent aspect of Italian female-authored narratives published during the 1980s and 1990s. In *Oltre Babilonia* Scego re-works this process by combining the multiplication of speaking positions with other narrative devices, ones that are more traditional for women writers. On the one hand maternal subjectivity finds its own voice, along with the daughter's, as the two speaking mothers in the novel demonstrate. On the other hand, fragments of the mother's voice resurface occasionally through the daughter's narration.

In *Oltre Babilonia* self-narration is deeply intertwined with meta-narration, in that the four homodiegetic narrators are portrayed in the act of writing or recording parts of the book we are reading. In the course of the narration, the material supports of the story-telling (note-books and

4 If the intermingling of Mar's and Miranda's perspective produces the effect of one narrating voice speaking for two characters, *Oltre Babilonia* also presents the opposite situation, that is, one character speaking with two voices. In fact, Miranda speaks at the same time as a mother and as a daughter. Since the internal dialogue would contradict Cavarero's model of "il sé narrabile", that is, the necessity of the other who is an other, an actual other person, I do not explore this aspect any further here, but is is interesting to note that this possibility exists, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

audiotapes) are evident, almost exhibited. Zuhra accurately chooses and describes her red note-books. Miranda is portrayed in the act of scribbling on hers. The bag full of recorded audiotapes is personally handed by Maryam to her puzzled daughter. Both Maryam and Elias repeatedly hint at the act of recording their voices on tape.

An interesting aspect of Maryam's narrating voice is that it is strongly characterised by orality, not only as a means of transmission (she is recording her voice), but also as a personal style. For instance, Zuhra refers to her mother's language as “orale”, a language made of “storia, poesia, musica e canti” (444). Upon closer examination, traits of orality are recognisable in both mothers' narrating voices, whose accounts randomly follow associations of memory rather than a more objective chronological rendition of the facts. The linearity of the narration is fragmented and continually twisted, overtly affected by the logic of the subconscious. Miranda expresses a difficulty common to both mother-narrators, when she confesses to her daughter: “Perdonami, non riesco ad annodare i fili della mia strana vita in ordine cronologico. Ho qualche difficoltà con il tempo” (182).

The presence of a strong component of orality in the accounts of both mothers is by no means coincidental. As Cavarero (2003) explains, the voice, which is the instrument through which orality finds its expression, is the distinctive sign of uniqueness, and thus, is the most powerful way in which subjectivity can be expressed:

> La voce infatti non maschera, smaschera piuttosto la parola che la maschera. La parola può dire tutto e il suo contrario. La voce, qualsiasi cosa dica, comunica invece, prima di tutto e sempre, una sola cosa: l'unicità di chi la emette (33).

Moreover, Cavarero makes a distinction between female and male use of the voice and argues that in the phallo-logo-centric symbolic system the word, meant as *logos*, is the means of transmission of a male-dominated thought: “La tradizione metafisica soggioga la parola [al] registro del pensiero” (141). Since women are excluded from “pensiero” and from the “parola” as the privileged expression of thought, their voices are relegated to singing, or silence (130-45). Through the voices of the mothers, Scego challenges this exclusion. In Miranda's and Maryam's narrations “la parola” becomes “il punto di incrocio, se si vuole, di tensione, tra i due poli: la voce che ne costituisce il tessuto sonoro e il significato verbale che essa è tenuta ad esprimere” (Cavarero, 2003: 141). Maryam uses a typically feminine instrument, the voice, not to sing, but to narrate. She appropriates the male-centred instrument of the word (“parola”) and accommodates it to the expression of her feminine and maternal narration. Likewise, Miranda, the poet and writer, combines in her voice elements that belong to both dimensions. She is writing to Mar, that is, she is

using the written word, governed by the law of logos. However, her narration is disseminated with elements that belong to orality. This combination subverts the formal organisation of a written text and counters the distinction between "il principio femminile del vocalico e quello maschile del semantico" (143). In both maternal narrations, the centrality of maternal subjectivity is underlined by the oral dimension, since the voice is a privileged way to express a person's unicity.

The mothers' narrations are described as an act of "raggomitolare la lana del tempo, sfilare la tela, ritesserla, trovare i nodi, scucire di nuovo, eliminare i nodi," (182) a metaphoric translation of a narrative technique that often characterises the so called 'trauma fiction.' In her essay on narratives that stage traumatic experiences, Anne Whitehead (2004) investigates how the effects of trauma are transposed into fiction through narrative devices such as "repetitions, ellipses, flashbacks, blank spaces, non-chronological narratives and screen memories" (83-85). All these devices can be found in *Oltre Babilonia*. More often than the other narrators, Miranda expresses her difficulty in following a linear narration: "Non riesco ad essere organica. Cronologica. Ti dico le cose alla rinfusa, come capita," (94) as if it is an unwanted side-effect of the trauma. While a traumatic experience shapes and sometimes triggers all the narrations, there is one aspect that makes the mothers' accounts stand out. Only in Miranda's and Maryam's voices is the reconstruction of the past achieved through a first-person account. Elias, whose narration also focuses on the past, speaks in the third person, while Zuhra's narration mainly focuses on the present.

3. Narrations "on the hypen"

Staging a group of characters who combine different cultures and ethnicities (and often belong to more than one simultaneously), *Oltre Babilonia* deals with multi-ethnicism and multiculturalism. Therefore, its investigation raises the issue of terminology in relation to the so-called migrant literature. In spite of the remarkable work undertaken by scholars in the field of "migrant literature", as a genre this term lacks a satisfactory, comprehensive definition. As Azade Seyan maintains, descriptive categories such as "*exilic*, *ethnic*, *migrant*, or *diasporic* cannot do justice to the nuances of the writings between histories, geographies and cultural practices" (9). The debate is extensive[5] and most of the terms used do not cover the whole variety of literature "operative between two or more languages and cultural heritages" (Seyan 9). Graziella Parati, a pioneering Italianist in the study of Italophone literature produced by writers with a non-Italian linguistic and

5 The current usage of such terms as immigrant writing or migrant literature is problematic and unsatisfactory, and turns out to be an oversimplification, in that the notion of migrant literature seems to imply a literature that is, to some extent, less than or other to national literature. However, since my research focuses on the literary representation of the mother-daughter relationship, I confine myself to justifying how I use the specific terminology referring to migrant writers.

cultural background, cautions against the limited function of terms such as migrant literature. In her words,

> post-migration and post-ethnic writings demonstrate [...] that even separations between native writers and migrant writers can only be temporary, and only relatively valid. Those borders established between linguistic experts and migrant writers shift and reflect the changing relation between local and incoming culture (2005: 194).

Further discussion among scholars of different cultural backgrounds has produced multiple definitions, such as *métissage* or accented, diasporic, exilic literature, in relation to post-colonial and migrant literary production.[6] However, far from establishing an all-comprehensive definition, the richness and variety of terminology forged so far by scholars accounts for the inexhaustible complexity of the issue. In what follows I use the adjective 'migrant' and 'exilic' only because they apply best to the individual experiences narrated in *Oltre Babilonia*, whose characters embody what Gustavo Pérez Firmat defines as a "life on the hyphen" (1994).

If it is always reductive to label a novel due to its giving voice to marginalised groups (women, migrants, linguistic minorities and so on) within a dominant society, it is even more so in the case of *Oltre Babilonia*, which simultaneously deals with a double difference, and thus with a double exclusion. Compared to their male counterparts, in fact,

> le donne migranti, avendo pochi diritti politici o sentendosi fuori dai percorsi istituzionali, si sentono più comunemente senza patria, poiché in linea generale anche nel paese di origine non hanno la possibilità di far sentire la propria voce (Comberiati, 2010: 81).

Through its characters' self-scrutiny the novel reveals what happens when migrant literature crosses paths with gender and dovetails with the complexities of the mother-daughter plot. As Lucie Benchouiha states:

> The categories of gender, race and difference are the lines of identity predominantly established by this new generation of female African Italian women writers. The depiction of these authors' identities throughout their writing [...] culminates in the

6 Some of these scholars, such as Graziella Parati (*Mediterranean Crossroads* 1999 and *Migration Italy. The Art of Talking Back to a Destination Culture* 2005), Daniele Comberiati (*Scrivere nella Lingua dell'Altro* 2010), Fulvio Pezzarossa (*Leggere il Testo e il Mondo* 2011), Armando Gnisci (*Nuovo Planetario Italiano* 2006), are specifically engaged with the text written in the Italian language. However, I also consider theoretical and critical works on migrant literature not necessarily linked to the Italian cultural landscape, such as the studies produced by Gloria Anzaldua, Gustavo Perez Firmat, Azade Seyad and others.

> portrayal of a sense of self that is built upon the concepts of race, gender and difference, with race being relevant primarily in its intersection with gender issues [...] (418).

The four female protagonists of *Oltre Babilonia* grapple with many of the variables that characterise the exilic experience: the dichotomy of same-other, ethnic and cultural conflicts, linguistic wavering, weakening or lack of roots, the experience of exclusion and marginality and so on. The interweaving narrating voices create multiple dialogues in which the difficulties caused by the experience of displacement are framed in two mother-daughter plots: Maryam-Zuhra and Miranda-Mar.

Born in Somalia like her mother, Zuhra grew up in Rome, where she received her education, so that her cultural identity is firmly grounded in both cultures: Italian and Somali. Her double belonging manifests itself mainly on the linguistic level:

> Mamma mi parla nella nostra lingua madre. Spumosa, scostante, ardita. Nella sua bocca il somalo diventa miele. Ma io, come la parlo questa nostra lingua madre? Io, Zuhra figlia di Maryam, incespico nel mio alfabeto confuso. Le mie parole puzzano di strade asfaltate, cemento e periferia. Però mi sforzo lo stesso di parlare con lei quella lingua che ci unisce. In somalo ho trovato il conforto del suo utero, in somalo ho fatto i primi sogni. Ma poi, in ogni discorso, parola, sospiro, fa capolino l'altra madre. L'italiano con cui sono cresciuta e che ho anche odiato, perché mi faceva sentire straniera. L'italiano-aceto dei mercati rionali, l'italiano-dolce della radio, l'italiano serio dell'università. L'italiano che scrivo (443-4).

Although stumbling (“incespico”) when she moves from one language to the other, Zuhra refers to both as mother-tongues. Somali connects her to her mother Maryam (“questa lingua che ci unisce”), Italian is the other mother (“l'altra madre”), the language she uses in most of her other relationships and activities, including writing.

As women and as migrants, mother and daughter share the painful experience of being the Other, even though to a different degree. Maryam has not adapted to the new culture. As Zuhra remarks, her mother struggles with the pronunciation of the Italian language: “Dava appuntamento alle persone a Ottaviano o, come diceva lei, a Ottopiano. Quella *v* maledetta non era mai riuscita a pronunciarla bene” (50-1). While Maryam feels marginalised and cannot speak the language of the country she lives in properly, Zuhra instead embodies a true example of “hyphenated culture.” Her linguistic and cultural space is both Italian and Somali, and the identities on either side of the

hyphen in her case perform “a balancing act” (Perez Firmat 6).[7]

This double-belonging allows Zuhra to be integrated into Italian culture and society, but it also deepens the distance between her and her mother. Maryam is hopelessly bound to a sorrowful past, of which Zuhra knows almost nothing. In fact, the daughter does not even know her father's name. However, their different attitude towards Italy does not account completely for the complexity of their relationship. There is something that troubles them more profoundly than their cultural diversity. Zuhra and Maryam share an unspeakable trauma that tears them apart more irreparably than their differences in education, integration and language.

4. Narrating the Body as a site of violence

Maryam grew up in a culture which practices genital mutilation on women, a violence whose effects are permanent on her body and mind. The physical violence suffered by the mother under the form of genital mutilation was repeated, in a different way, to the body of the daughter who, during her childhood, experienced sexual abuse while her mother was lost in her own despair. Zuhra draws a parallel between Maryam's mutilation and the permanent consequences of her own traumatic experiences to her body and psyche: “A me la cucitura me l'hanno fatta nella testa, accidentaccio. Alla fine il risultato è lo stesso. Non godo. Nemmeno dell'aria godo” (339). Maryam has experienced a real “cucitura”, that is the infibulation following the clitoridectomy. For Zuhra the “cucitura” is psychological, but no less painful. Zuhra relates her mother's genital mutilation to her own rape, both resulting in their bodies' inability to experience sexual pleasure. Zuhra often alludes to her mutilation through a metaphor, claiming that she cannot see colours: “È che senza colori non puoi fare l'amore” (11).

The experience of violence, passing from the mother to the daughter, produced other unwanted effects, in that it has rendered them unable to talk to each other:

> Non parliamo tanto io e lei. Non ci riusciamo. E dire che io sono una chiacchierona. Ma con lei non ci riesco. Le leggo il dolore in faccia. Il senso di colpa per avermi lasciato da piccola in quel collegio. E' andata così, mamma [...]. Mi è successa una cosa orrenda, lì in collegio, ma ora basta, ti prego. Vorrei *voltare pagina* (81 *emphasis mine*).

Not only do mother and daughter share the same degree of trauma, they also need similar tools in order to recover their lost connection. For Maryam the act of narrating is a way of compensating for

7 The blending of two cultures characterising Zuhra's condition is what Perez Firmat defines as “biculturation”, a term that “describes a situation where the two cultures achieve a balance that makes it difficult to determine which is the dominant and which is the subordinate culture.” (6)

the love and the care she could not give to Zuhra earlier:

> Ma era difficile raccontare le sue cose a Zuhra. Era difficile spiegarle tutti i suoi errori di mamma. Del gin. Della fuga. Di suo padre. Della paura che per anni l'aveva scorticata viva. Era difficile parlare con Zuhra [...] (55) La mamma lo sapeva che la figlia ne aveva bisogno (56) Lo doveva dire a Zuhra questo? Subito? Sì, all'istante, non doveva perdere tempo, ne aveva già perso tanto con quella sua ragazza triste (58).

The private act of narrating serves as a therapy to sooth their wounded bodies and souls and foreshadows the possibility of reforging the mother-daughter bond. For this reason mother and daughter, each unbeknownst to the other, begin to tell their stories, Zuhra by writing a book, Maryam by recording her life on tape. Thus, Zuhra's invitation to turn the page ("voltare pagina") is a powerful metaphor which explicitly combines the act of writing and reading with the emotional process of abandoning a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship, born under patriarchy, in order to build a new one, rooted in a different, more friendly context. For Zuhra, the act of narrating is also a way to rediscover her femininity, from which she has been violently separated. By taking up the pen, Zuhra gradually recovers the body that has been stolen from her. In this process, she needs her mother's contribution under the form of another, complementary narration. In fact, as her mother's destiny condemned Zuhra to "lose" her body, now she needs her mother's help in order to re-appropriate it.

Like most narratives dealing with the mother-daughter plot, *Oltre Babilonia* also interweaves narration with bodily dimension, so that

> languages and body intersect and outflow in scattered internal narratives zigzagging between past, present, and future, written in letters, emails, and in an old-fashioned red notebook where the unspeakable is inscribed through the body and its fluids, or spoken into an old tape recorder (Carroli 212).

This aspect is particularly evident in Zuhra's account, which is tuned to the bodily dimension from the first pages of the book. The onset of Zuhra's narration focuses in fact on her menstrual blood, whose colour she cannot see because of the trauma she has suffered. This physical detail is the one that best represents both her femininity and the distress caused by her violated body. It soon becomes the *fil rouge* of Zuhra's account and underscores the circular structure of *Oltre Babilonia*, which ends by focusing again on her menstrual blood. But this time, she is finally able to see the colours, and especially the red, which is associated with both blood (as a bodily fluid) and passion.

While Maryam has reconstructed the daughter's genealogy, simultaneously Zuhra has recovered her body and is open to enjoy sexual pleasure. In fact, the final pages hint at the meeting Zuhra is going to have with “il pellegrino”, a possible love, coveted in her fantasy until this point, but now potentially about to become real.

Zuhra's estrangement from her body and its connection to the act of writing is reminiscent of Hélène Cixous' observation:

> [as women] We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty […] Why so few [women's] texts? Because so few women have as yet won back their bodies. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes (885-6).

Echoing the intersection between body and language, Zuhra wonders if her mother's mother-tongue can mother her: “Mi chiedo se la lingua di mia madre possa farmi da madre” (443), compensating for the love she did not receive as a daughter and for the trauma she has suffered as a child.

The circularity of Zuhra's account is paralleled by Maryam's narration. At the beginning of the book Zuhra asks her mother a key question: “Ti è mai piaciuto fare l'amore con gli uomini [...] con papà?” (56) Maryam answers only at the end of the novel, implying that all her narration can function as an answer to the daughter's question:

> Una volta mi hai chiesto se con papà era stato bello [...] Non ti ho saputo rispondere. Non saprei nemmeno dirti bene come sia andata la faccenda tra me e lui, a dir la verità. Però in queste cassette c'è la risposta. Una delle risposte possibili (451).

By representing Zuhra as “estranged from her body, the site of violence, for most of the novel” (Benedetti 102) Scego also pays homage to an important tradition in Italian women's writing. For instance, a physical mutilation - or better, a self-inflicted sensory mutilation - as a reaction to sexual abuse is reminiscent of Marianna, the protagonist of Dacia Maraini's *La Lunga Vita di Marianna Ucrìa* (1990), a woman who turned deaf-mute in her early childhood after being raped by a male relative. Like Marianna, Zuhra, too, belongs to the progeny of un-mothered daughters, victims of male violence, who have to come to terms with their mothers' aloofness or absence in order to achieve reconciliation with their body and sexuality. A similar reaction is depicted in Annie Vivanti's novel *Vae Victis* (1917), where a girl becomes mute after being forced to witness a rape.

Scego's choice to interpret the sensory mutilation as a mysterious inability to see colours is interesting in a novel whose characters are variously obsessed with chromatic variety. In fact, most of the time colour literally refers to the pigmentation of the skin and its heavy relational implications (in Mar, Zuhra and Maryam), while metaphorically colours (as in Zuhra's case) represent emotions and symbolise the propriety of objects, persons and situations to elicit feelings in us.[8]

5. Mis-recognition and dis-identification

Unlike the first mother-daughter dyad, Mar and Miranda struggle over the physical diversity between a white mother and a black daughter, a dichotomy which serves as a remarkable source of distress for the daughter, and acts as a catalyst for most of the complexities of their relationship.

As the daughter of a black man and a white woman, Mar is a hybrid. For Mar, her physical difference is the most unbearable demonstration of her otherness to Miranda: “Una ragazza nera. Troppo nera. Con una madre bianca” (26). Given that Miranda is successful and admired, Mar draws the conclusion that her diversity is at fault. Her blackness, hence, means being nullified.

Being the black daughter of a white mother further prevents her identification with a maternal figure already perceived as unreachable and, hence, as a source of frustration:

> Tregua, mamma, tregua. Sei bella, mamma. Unica. Troppo per me. Non vedi che non ce la faccio? Sì, non ce la faccio a sostenere te.. Non lo hai mai capito? Sei un vulcano, mamma. Un vulcano per me, così debole. Io scappo. Da te, da me, da tutti é [...]
> Mamma, ti prego, tregua (333).

Comparing herself to her mother, Mar feels miserable and, hopelessly defeated, appeals for a truce (“Mamma, ti prego, tregua”). Her own uncertain sense of self clashes with her perception of Miranda's success as a woman (“sei un vulcano”) but also calls into question something else: the ambivalence that Miranda experiences as a mother. While blaming Miranda for being unable to give her the “dolcezza”(74), the nurturing side of motherhood she needs so badly, Mar sheds light on the profound but less visible spring of her malaise: that of feeling unloved by her mother.

During the 1980s and 1990s women writers such as Fabrizia Ramondino (*Althenopis*, 1981) Francesca Sanvitale (*Madre e Figlia*, 1980), Carla Cerati (*La Cattiva Figlia*, 1996), Elena Ferrante (*L'Amore Molesto*, 1999) and others published a number of novels centred on the figures of unloved

8 In relation to skin-colour perception, Alessandro Portelli defines Italy as a “colour-blind country.” See “The Problem of the Color Blind: Notes on the Discourse on Race in Italy” in *CrossRoutes. The Meaning of Race for the XXI Century*, ed. By P.Boi, S.Broek, Hamburg and London, LIT, 2003, (29-39).

adult daughters longing for distant, sometimes indifferent and often damaging mothers. Similarly, at the outset of the novel Miranda and Mar suffer from a reciprocal mistrust and lack of recognition. Mar is wounded by Miranda's aloofness:

> Sua madre usava sempre il verde, per presentarsi al mondo. Verde acqua, verde chiaro, verde foresta, verde minestra, verde scuro. Mar lo odiava il verde [...] Per lei non era il colore della speranza, ma dell'oppressione. Non le piaceva quel muro di alberi che la madre aveva messo tra loro (268).

In her insight on the daughter's troubled feelings towards her mother, Muraro (1991) sheds light on Mar's attitude towards Miranda. Speaking about herself, Muraro maintains: “Io sentivo e agivo come se la donna che mi ha messa al mondo fosse *nemica* della mia indipendenza simbolica” (9 *emphasis mine*). Likewise, Mar perceives her mother as distant - “Era sua figlia ed era come se fosse una semplice sconosciuta,”(268) - if not *nemic*a. Interweaving Mar's and Miranda's points of view, the narrating voice refers to Mar as “quella figlia tanto strana che non le assomigliava per niente. Né fisicamente, né spiritualmente. O forse le assomigliava molto” (29). The internal focalisation adopted in this passage matches both Mar's and Miranda's standpoints. Both mother and daughter agree on the estrangement, on the dis-identification between them, although for profoundly different reasons. The daughter's feelings of rejection clash with maternal ambiguity. Mar's distressing identification with Miranda (or the lack of it) becomes patent here, as Mar is depicted as the daughter who “non le assomigliava per niente” and yet “forse le assomigliava molto.”

Where does Miranda's difficulty to relate to her daughter come from? And why does she feel at fault for Mar's unhappiness? The successful poet Miranda, indeed, hides a secret. Miranda, too, has suffered from being the daughter of a mother who did not love her enough, who showed disgust for her daughter's body, and handed down to her a humiliating legacy of low self-esteem. Having escaped from maternal rejection and from Argentinean dictatorship, Miranda successfully reconstructed her life in Italy as a revered intellectual. Even though she has never revealed her harrowing past to her daughter, Miranda's self-hatred has been passed on to Mar. Miranda knows that an unloving mother always produces a daughter at odds with her body. For instance, her obsessive dissatisfaction with her body is a consequence of her own mother's critical remarks: “Per mamma io ero una persona inutile […] mi faceva notare le mie imperfezioni” (89). Every now and then this memory of the maternal rejection resurfaces in Miranda's narration. After so many years,

her mother's malevolent comments about the size of her hands are still a sore point to her. As evidenced in Chapter 1, psychoanalysis can offer an interesting insight on the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship. This insight is also valuable in relation to fictional characters. As Italian psychoanalyst Lella Ravasi Bellocchio observes,

> lo stampo primario delle relazioni affettive, delle storie d'amore, ma anche del nostro modo di aprirci o meno al mondo, sta dentro la madre, nell'impronta che da lei ci viene e che noi come madri a nostra volta ci troviamo a trasmettere (163).

The effect of this unwanted maternal transmission is visible not only in the troubled relationship between Miranda and Mar, but also in Mar's masochistic behavior, such as her eating disorders, attempted suicides, and her tendency to self-annihilation in relationships with both male and female partners.

Mar's relational disorder and her passive compliance to others' decisions regarding her body (as in the case of her pregnancy and abortion) are strongly interwoven with and influenced by her dysfunctional relationship to Miranda:

> The relationship with the mother is, in fact, connected to the daughter's own attitude towards motherhood as a socio-biological role; it calls into question the daughter's conceptualization of her generative powers, and her decision to become – or not to become – a mother (Benedetti, 102).

The Diotima philosophical community devoted a book to the investigation of the dark side of the mother. As Delfina Lusiardi Sassi argues in her contribution,

> l'ombra della madre […] disturba proprio le relazioni vitali, le relazioni dove il materno potrebbe agire in tutta la sua potenzialità creativa e trasformatrice. E, invece, spesso diventa un *grumo* opaco che *sfigura l'immagine* di una donna, sulla quale si proietta, insieme alla nostalgia, l'angoscia del primo legame. Quello con il corpo della madre. […] Non sospettiamo che ci sia questa specie di abisso pieno di ombre, fino a quando il fantasma della madre risale dall'oscurità e produce effetti sconvolgenti [...] (2007: 127).

The daughter's inability to identify with her mother, therefore, is more than "skin-deep." The source from which the conflict flows is a maternal bond painfully severed. Now the time has come for Miranda to give to Mar what she herself has been denied as a daughter, and, in doing this, to develop a different mother-daughter relationship from the one she experienced. The beginning of

Miranda's narration, thus, represents a turning point in the chain of the "unworkability of the mother-daughter connection" (Hughes, 163).

By incorporating issues related to ethnicity and multiculturalism into the mother-daughter plot, Scego brings a new dimension to a familiar frame in female-authored novels. Ethnic and cultural differences magnify the deepest conflict undermining the identities of these characters. In fact, the mirror in which the daughters look for sameness as women, that is their mothers, gives back a disconcerting image, with which it is impossible to identify. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, Simone de Beauvoir explains the position of the mother in relation to her identification with the daughter. From her daughter the mother expects sameness and is disappointed when does not find the sameness she expects: "She projects upon her daughter all the ambiguity of her relation with herself; and when the otherness of this alter-ego manifests itself, the mother feels herself betrayed" (496).

The daughter, too, observes the mother and watches her "for clues as to what it means to be a woman" (Rich, 243). For the protagonists of *Oltre Babilonia* the maternal mirror offers a puzzling reflection. Zuhra, the educated, multicultural and integrated young woman, can hardly mirror herself in her marginalised, defeated, illiterate mother. For Mar, the situation is even more disquieting. Thinking of herself as the daughter who is excessively black and worthless because of her hybridity, how can she recognise a fragment of herself in the successful white woman who gave birth to her? Her position introduces an interesting variation of the mother-daughter trope. Although her feelings of dereliction follow the well-known pattern of a daughter longing for maternal love and recognition, the persistent black-daughter versus white-mother motif is something new and so far unexplored in Italian female-authored literature.

The racial dichotomy, in the form of the oppositional couple white woman/black man, has already been dealt with by the Italian writer Annie Vivanti at the beginning of the century.[9] Born to an Italian father and to an English mother, Vivanti was familiar with the experience of a double cultural identity. It is not a coincidence that she is the first Italian woman writer to tackle the issue of race in her novels. During the last two decades, this task has been taken on by migrant women writers such as Genevieve Makaping, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Ingy Mubiayi, Laila Wadia, Gabriella Kuruvilla and others. Race has been so far a dominant category, especially in the works of African Italian women writers.

9 The protagonist of Vivanti's novel *Mea Culpa* (1927) is an English (and white) woman who has an *affaire* with an Egyptian man. They conceive a daughter, Darling, but this hybrid fruit of their love has no trace of her non-Aryan biological father. The exotic genes resurface unexpectedly in the following generation. When the daughter falls pregnant to her white and blond husband, she gives birth to a baby who is all but white. However, since Darling dies in childbirth, and the child is male, Vivanti avoids framing the racial clash within the mother-daughter plot. See Parati (1995).

Published at the beginning of the 1990, *Volevo Diventare Bianca* is one of the first texts written in the Italian language by a non-native speaker, Nassera Chohra.[10] This autobiographical account offers an example of how migrant women writers articulate the discourses of gender and race by fictionalising the discomfort experienced by a young black woman when she discovers the extent to which her ethnic diversity affects her life in Italy. The young protagonist blames her parents for her skin colour, and is ashamed of her mother because of her darker skin. The boundaries between black and white, although creating resentment between mother and daughter, do not separate them. In Chohra's autobiographical account, otherness is still outside the mother-daughter dyad. On the contrary, in Scego's fictional rendition of the mother-daughter troubled relationship ethnic boundaries sever the mother from the daughter. It has to be noted that, whereas the first writers adopted autobiographical modes of narration, in the most recent texts produced by migrant writers fiction prevails. The difference in genre between Chohra and Scego reveals the evolution that has occurred between first and second generation of migrant writers.

In *Oltre Babilonia* the maternal mirror shows Mar irrefutably that she is the Other even in relation to her mother. If the combination of race and gender is not unheard of in the Italian women writers' literary production, the way Scego problematises the influence of these elements in the construction of female identity represents an innovation. The double Otherness experienced by Zuhra and Mar of being both women and black becomes threefold for Mar. Although Scego's novel is deeply rooted in an Italian context, it is useful here to borrow a few insights from African American feminism to shed light on the feelings of a black woman, who is the daughter of a white mother. As Patricia Hill Collins argues,

> The mother-daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday *knowledge essential to survival* as African American women (1990: 96 *emphasis mine*).

Although Collins is referring to African American women, a reality very different from that depicted by Scego, her statement nevertheless serves to illustrate the difficulties experienced by Mar. Mar's white mother was unable to transmit to her “the everyday knowledge essential to survival” as a black woman. Black mothers help their daughters to defend themselves and to find their place in a world that is oppressive and hostile to them by using a clever combination of protection and encouragement.[11] The transmission of a sense of specialness is made possible by a

10 Nassera Chohra was born in France to Algerian parents. Having arrived in Italy during the 1980s, she wrote her autobiographical novel *Volevo Diventare Bianca* in Italian with the help of an Italian journalist. The shared authorship is the reason why I do not include it in the survey of migrant writers I mention in this chapter.

11 A touching example of this attitude is offered by Audre Lorde's autobiographical novel *Zami: a New Spelling of My*

condition common to Black women. In fact, the colour of their skin, combined with their gender, makes Black women especially visible as a category, and invisible and objectified as human beings. This very condition paradoxically turned into a huge source of power for them. As Audre Lorde (1984) remarks, the "visibility that makes us most vulnerable is that which is also the source of our greatest strength" (42). In fact, it allowed Black women to develop a special kind of solidarity between themselves resulting in extremely strong relationships among women that went well beyond family connections. As Collins contends,

> For African-American women the listener more able to move beyond the invisibility created by the objectification as the Other in order to see and hear the fully human Black woman is another Black woman (98).

In light of these observations, Mar's discomfort becomes easier to understand. Being the Black daughter of a white mother, she is denied access to the 'safety' networks represented by other Black women, their mediation, their extended family and the communities they form. For instance, Miranda's inability to take care of Mar's curly hair might seem a trifling detail: "Mamma Miranda poi, non l'aveva aiutata molto a gestire quella selva che le spuntava dal capo. Nessun aiuto, consigli fuori posto, imbarazzo [...]" (392). On the contrary, it is a clear indication of the mother's inability to provide the daughter with the "essential skills in life" as a Black woman.

The mis-recognition between Mar and Miranda is experienced as a source of difficulties by both of them. Mar is trapped in a paradoxical situation, since the daughter's identification with her mother, so unattainable for her, is a necessary step in order to move away from the quicksand of maternal entanglement and gain full awareness of herself as a woman. The identification with the mother, which is traditionally experienced as highly problematic for the daughter,[12] becomes even harder for Mar. Nevertheless, she has to face it and find a reconciliation with the maternal.

Tracing the development of the relationship between mother and child, Benjamin (1988) observes how recognition is essential for the growth and well-being of both mother and child:

Name (1982). Lorde remembers white people spitting at her, when as a child she walked with her mother in racially mixed zones of New York. "My mother wiped it off with the little pieces of newspaper she always carried in her purse. Sometimes, she fussed about low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind […] impressing on me that this humiliation was totally random. It never occurred to me to doubt her. […] if she couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else" (9).

12 Adrienne Rich recalls her own experience, her ambivalent feelings towards her mother as a model and towards her mother's body: "In my adolescence I still glanced slyly at my mother's body, vaguely imagining: I too shall have breasts, full hips [...] and there were other thoughts: I too shall marry, have children, but not *like her* [*emphasis in the original text*]. I shall find a way of doing it all differently" (Rich: 219). The reasons for the daughter's troubled identification with her mother are rooted in the economy of patriarchal attitudes which lead us to "project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the 'other' woman" (N.Miller, "The case of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*" in Giorgio, 2007).

“Recognition can be compared to that essential element in photosynthesis, sunlight, which provides the energy for the plant's constant transformation of substance” (22). For the process to be successful, however, recognition must occur on both sides, the mother's and the child's, becoming something that Benjamin defines as “mutual recognition”:

> The idea of mutual recognition is crucial to the inter-subjective view: it implies that we actually have a need to recognise the other as a separate person who is like us yet distinct (23).

Recognition, as a two way process, is the necessary experience that the two mother-daughter dyads in *Oltre Babilonia* have to undergo. Only maternal recognition can lead the daughter(s) to a reconciliation with “the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display, the ailing figure which so often turns out to be the cause and location of inhibitions” (Cixous, 880). The statement made by Cixous applies to both daughters in the novel. If the trauma of violence has turned Zuhra's body into the “location of inhibitions”, likewise, the ethnic hybridity has rendered Mar's body an insurmountable obstacle to her identification with Miranda. As for Zuhra, the process of deconstruction of a dysfunctional maternal bond is also for Mar a “means not to undo our ties to others, but rather to disentangle them; to make of them not shackles but circuits of recognition” (Benjamin, 1988: 221).

In both mother-daughter pairs the means through which the disentanglement is achieved is the maternal narration. Throughout the narration, the feelings of dereliction affecting daughters in contemporary Italian narratives are re-worked and a new maternal bond is about to be forged. Thanks to their mothers' story-telling, Zuhra and Mar will be able to gain that kind of strength “which can only be a woman's gift to another, the bloodstream of our inheritance” (Rich, 246). As in the case of Maryam and Zuhra, for Mar and Miranda too a new feeling of reciprocal warmth and complicity springs up at the end of the novel. Mother and daughter finally seem ready to leave behind the old relational pattern based on silence, rejection and frustration. Miranda, perceived as a distant mother at the beginning of the story (“solo lei, Mar, rimaneva fuori dal coro e dal cuore di sua madre” 269), assumes a benevolent attitude towards her daughter:

> Quel pomeriggio erano state felici: Lei, la figlia, con sua madre. Non era la Miranda distante e altera [...] giusta e raziocinante. No, era solo sua madre quel pomeriggio. Semplicemente una donna (269).

Simultaneously, Miranda, too, is aware that a change has occurred: “Ti ho abbracciata e non mi

hai scacciata come al solito. Era bello sentire di nuovo il tuo calore, figlia mia. Sentire la tua pelle, il tuo odore. Mi sono ricordata di quando ti davo il seno" (360). Miranda's words put a great emphasis on physical closeness between mother and daughter, in spite of the barrier that the different skin has raised between them. The daughters' search for maternal recognition has seemingly and finally met the mothers' need to be recognized. Miranda's last words, fraught with hope and warmth, confirm this interpretation: "Il nostro cammnino, il tuo e il mio, dev'essere ora in direzione del sole" (415).

The uncomfortable position of Mar in relation to her mother brings the limit of feminist discourse in light of marginalised, minority, non-white women up for discussion. Over the last few decades several voices, such as bell hook, Patricia White, Caren Kaplan, Audre Lorde and many others, have criticised the biased, ethnocentric perspective of Western feminist scholarship in order to develop a more complex and inclusive notion of feminism. In her essay *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Talpade (2003) suggests a comprehensive "critique of Eurocentrism and of West developmentalist discourses of modernity, especially through the lens of racial, sexual and class based assumption of Western feminist scholarship" (10). And Rosi Braidotti and Gabriele Griffin (2002) also investigate the intersection of race and gender in a European context. In the Italian cultural landscape, theoretical discussion on the articulation of gender and race and its social impact is still at its initial stage.[13] Dealing with the same issues raised within the theoretical debate, *Oltre Babilonia* makes a case for the necessity to broaden the paradigms of interpretation of society, especially in relation to female lineage and race.

Scego's attempt to reshape the maternal bond through migrant experience also echoes the process of de-territorialization enacted by feminist writing, as discussed by Caren Kaplan (1987), whose insight draws upon the discourse developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) on minor literature. According to Deleuze's formulation:

> Minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language. But the primary characteristic of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is affected by a strong co-efficient of de-territorialization (16).

Applying the theory of Minor Literature to women writings, Kaplan argues that women always write from a deterritorialised position, in that they have to use a language which always articulates

13 See Caterina Romeo and Cristina Lombardi-Diopp (2012), Caterina Romeo, (2011), Daniele Comberiati (2009), Graziella Parati (2005) Alessandro Dal Lago (2001) and Lidia Curti (1998). Dal Lago, in particular, provides a critique of Muraro's position in relation to the themes of migration and migrants' rights.

women as Other. Borrowing Kaplan's words, it can be said that *Oltre Babilonia*'s “expanded sense of 'minor' acts against [...] the suppression of differences. It points towards a rewriting of the connections between different parts of the self in order to make a world of possibilities out of the experience of displacement” (198). In Scego's novel women can access access this “world of possibilities” through maternal mediation. Facing a double displacement, as women and as migrants (or daughters of the migrant), these mothers and daughters can build a sense of belonging only by virtue of a recovered maternal bond.

Significantly, the author concludes the novel by prefiguring, but dictating, a mother-daughter reconciliation. Scego does not recompose the mother-daughter conflict. Having created the conditions for reconciliation, the author suggests this is only one of the possible outcomes. After having laboriously brought her characters together in the same room, the writer, gently taking them by the hand, now discreetly sets the door ajar and leaves them facting each other. Aware of Virginia Woolfs' warning that women's silence cannot be filled in, but only described (1929), Scego does not rewrite their stories, but creates the conditions for the characters to do this themselves. What they have done so far is simply “voltare pagina”. To write a new mother-daughter plot, on a new page, is a different task, possibly the next one.

6. “Potenza materna”

In spite of some superficial differences, these two mother-daughter pairs have important aspects in common. Firstly, both mothers have been un-mothered daughters. Secondly, both daughters have been kept in the dark about their mothers' past, a circumstance that deprived them of a female genealogy. Thirdly, as Miranda's self-hatred is handed down to Mar, in the same way the physical violence experienced by Maryam is passed on to Zuhra. For the former dyad the violence is psychological, for the latter physical, but the effects on the daughters are substantially the same.

The estrangement variously experienced by these mothers and daughters is a symptom and a side-effect of a maternal bond weakened, almost severed, by patriarchal violence. Whether it was under the form of a ruthless foreign colonization (Somalia), of a bloodthirsty domestic dictatorship (Somalia and Argentina), or of a generally male-dominated culture, Maryam and Miranda suffered the violence of patriarchy both in their public and private lives. In their bodies and minds these mothers and daughters still carry the scars caused by a system in which few women “can feel mothered enough”[14] (Rich: 243). In fact, in patriarchal societies the dysfunctionality of the mother-

14 In her ground-breaking essay *Of Woman Born* Adrienne Rich states that the institutionalisation of Motherhood is a strategy used by patriarchal cultures to reduce women to a state of dependency and subjugation. According to Rich, under patriarchy, “the power of our mothers, whatever their love for us and their struggles on our behalf, is too restricted” (Rich 243).

daughter relationship is caused by the superimposition of a male symbolic order on women (Rich 226; Muraro 1991). This framework is hostile to women and considers every relationship between women as threatening. Furthermore, it prevents a positive identification between mother and daughter and leads women to a symbolic disorder.[15] Therefore, the dominant male-centred order needs to be replaced by a different, possibly female, frame of reference, so as to disentangle and empower the maternal bond, insofar as "il reale, in assenza di simbolico, è meno di niente" (Muraro, 100). As evidenced in Chapter 1, feminist theorists advocate for a female symbolical order. In the novels I analyse, however, the frame of reference that emerges, although alternative to the male-centred order, is not necessarily female. For instance, in *L'Arte della Gioia* Sapienza rejects a male-centred symbolical paradigm by replacing it with a flexible, more inclusive structure where the feminisation of the frame of reference does not exclude some masculine elements.

Having abandoned the position of unloved and unmothered daughters, Maryam and Miranda begin to fill the empty well of their maternal love and recover their "potenza materna", that is, their maternal position of power.[16] Muraro hypothesizes that only the recovery of the maternal bond can empower women's freedom and creativity, since "per la sua esistenza libera una donna ha bisogno, simbolicamente, della potenza materna, così come ne ha avuto bisogno materialmente per venire al mondo" (1991: 9).

The reconstruction of the "potenza materna" postulates the reappraisal of what Muraro defines as "l'amore per la madre". Writing about herself, Muraro recalls her lack of love for her mother: "Sono nata in una cultura in cui non si insegna l'amore della madre alle donne; eppure è il sapere più importante, senza il quale è difficile imparare il resto ed essere originali in qualcosa" (1991: 13). As the philosopher maintains: "Questo soltanto, infatti, rompe il circolo vizioso e mi fa uscire dalla trappola di una cultura che, non insegnandomi ad amare mia madre, mi ha privata della forza necessaria a cambiarla" (Muraro, 1991: 13). According to the Italian philosophical community Diotima, maternal authority, achieved through a renewed sense of gratefulness for the mother, allows a different symbolic order to come into being. Only within the female symbolic order can women ground their subjectivity (Parati, 64).

I have already discussed the concept of maternal authority in Chapter 2, in relation to *L'Arte della Gioia*. In *Oltre Babilonia* this concept works in a different way. Unlike Sapienza, Scego

15 This definition is provided by Muraro herself: "Si tratta in realtà di un terribile disordine simbolico" (10). And again: "Il disordine più grande, che mette in forse la possibilità stessa della libertà femminile, è l'ignoranza di un ordine simbolico della madre anche da parte delle donne" (1991: 92).

16 I would like to clarify that the 'maternal power' I am discussing here is a literal translation of Muraro's concept of "potenza materna". In this case maternal power is not meant as institutionalised or hierarchical power. For a further discussion see: A. Buttarelli, (1995) "Fare Autorità, Disfare Potere." In *Oltre l'Uguaglianza: le Radici Femminili dell'Autorità*. Diotima, Napoli: Liguori Editore. 85-103; and G.Parati, "Diotima's Dilemma" in Parati and West eds, *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*, London Associated University Press, 2002.

eludes the dichotomy between maternal authority and paternal power[17] and focuses, instead, on the process through which the bond of love between mother and daughter, or "l'amore femminile per la madre" (Muraro, 1992: 12) can be reconstructed. While Sapienza depicts motherhood as a relational (and temporary) practice, and mothers as replaceable, Scego investigates how a bond of love can be reforged between a mother and a daughter who already share a bond of blood.

Through the absolute centrality given to the mother-daughter tie and to its corporeality, Scego opposes and rejects the traditional representation of the mother-son dyad as the only possible interpretation of motherhood. The traditionally limited space devoted to the representation of the mother-daughter relationship is a feature of Italian literature that has only recently been scrutinised and challenged by literary texts. *Oltre Babilonia* is one of these in that it overturns the hierarchical structure of family relationships by giving pre-eminence to the mother's relationship with her adult daughter.

More than any other character, Miranda exemplifies the importance of "l'amore per la madre," that is, the reappraisal of the maternal function within a female frame of reference. Being a daughter and a mother herself, she gives voice simultaneously to both roles of the dyad.[18] On the one hand, Muraro's statement that the experience of motherhood for a woman is a way of re-writing her relationship with her mother is particularly true for Miranda as a daughter, who confronts her troubled maternal legacy only after becoming a mother herself:

> Il diventare madre è simbolicamente rilevante, io penso, perché ridisegna il rapporto di una donna con sua madre. Lo ridisegna variamente, nel senso dell'imitazione e dell'ammirazione o dell'invidia, della rivalità, della rivincita o dell'obbedienza amorosa (1991: 114).

On the other hand Miranda, as a mother, decides to inaugurate a different way of being in a mother-daughter relationship. For this reason she breaks the tenet of silence. Unlike her mother, Miranda decides to disclose her story to her daughter. Her act of talking to Mar thus "serves to establish a line between mother and daughter and between generations" (Giorgio, 2002: 128). With

17 As explained in Chapter 1, the discussion about maternal authority as opposed to paternal power is a key contention within Diotima's elaborations and is based on the idea that male (or paternal) power is always hierarchical and manifests itself in the institutions, while female (or maternal) authority is essentially relational and is validated through relational practises (Parati, 2002: 64-67).

18 Following Jung's insight on the maternal continuity, Italian psychoanalyst Lella Ravasi Bellocchio argues that "ogni donna contiene in sé sua madre e sua figlia." (5) Discussing the "mistero della separazione e della fusione tra madre e figlia," Ravasi states that "la donna è una in se stessa se riesce (e quando lo può fare) a essere anche nell'altra, nella madre. Figlia e madre della propria madre in un sentimento, come dice Jung, di 'liberazione dal tempo'" (7). This statement sheds light on Miranda's double role as a mother and as a daughter and on the interconnectedness of the two roles.

a glance to the past and one to the future Miranda's narration reconnects both mother and daughter to their common female genealogy and paves the way to a reconciliation.

In both mother-daughter dyads the maternal narration is triggered by a traumatic event. For Maryam it is the death of her life-long friend Howa. Miranda's narration, instead, begins when Mar's unfortunate love story with Patricia ends in tragedy, with Mar's unwanted abortion and Patricia's suicide. However painful the circumstance that ignites the process of maternal narration, its outcome is to create something new and bring it into the world: “Quando il materno si manifesta, anche nel suo aspetto oscuro, è per mettere al mondo qualcosa che prima non c'era” (Lusiardi, 127).

In the novel, the mother-daughter dialectical relationship can be mediated by other female figures. For instance, *Oltre Babilonia* displays a number of female characters acting as surrogate mothers, a topic that has been variously represented in narratives during the last two decades. Theoretical works debating the issue of surrogate motherhood depict it as “an attitude, a state of mind, a practice” (Benedetti 120). Scego interprets it in a similar way. When Maryam is distracted from her maternal duties, another woman takes care of Zuhra as a mother. This is Howa, who, like Zuhra, had been a victim of male violence during her childhood:

> Il suo patrigno si era preso in un colpo la sua verginità, il suo naso, gli anni migliori della sua vita […] Aveva scoperto a sue spese che la vita di una donna era sempre appesa a un filo. E quel filo si poteva spezzare in ogni momento (349).

When Zuhra is abused by a male attendant at the boarding school, Howa realises what is happening to the girl and rescues her. It is not a coincidence that, when Howa dies, Maryam begins her narration. The death of Zuhra's surrogate mother gives Maryam the motivation to face her past and to reaffirm her role as a mother, to recover her own story and share it with her daughter:

> Howa era morta. Quindi non c'era nessuno a cui volesse telefonare, con cui volesse veramente parlare. Anzi no, qualcuno c'era. Sua figlia. Zuhra (55).

Before mothering Zuhra, Howa had already acted as a mother to Maryam. Thus, after her death the maternal role passes onto Maryam as a legitimate legacy. This time Maryam is ready to carry on her duty as a mother. A female genealogy based on solidarity rather than on bloodlines is the link between Howa, Maryam and Zuhra. From Zuhra's perspective, this female lineage can be traced even further, to include Maryam's aunts and Elias' two mothers.

The novel presents other cases of surrogate motherhood. In Elias' narration, Bushra takes the place of her sister Famey as Elias' mother. Zuhra admires Miranda for her being a writer and an

intellectual and fantasises about having her as a mother, while acknowledging Howa's importance as a surrogate mother to her. In the last pages, in fact, Zuhra dreams of being pregnant and on the verge of giving birth. Instead of a child, she delivers heavy bars of iron, a symbolic representation of her burden of violence from which, after the delivery, she feels finally released (448-9). In the dream, the woman assisting her during this unusual childbirth is Howa, with her nose perfect, as it was before the violence that disfigured it. The dream seems to prefigure a way to re-write their bond, reforged outside the patriarchal violence that damaged both women.

Scego's insistence on the possibility of replacing the biological mother suggests a comparison with *L'Arte della Gioia*. In Sapienza's novel, it is the daughter, Modesta, who actively chooses her adoptive mother, and dismisses her when her help is no longer needed. In Scego, instead, the maternal role played by Bushra and Howa corresponds to what Black Feminists define as 'othermothers' (Troester, 1984). As I have discussed in Chapter 1, these “othermothers” are women who back up biological mothers when they cannot care for their children. For this reason, Modesta's active role is reminiscent of a voluntary act such as the *affidamento*, (although with the limits I have evidenced in Chapter 2), while the role of Bushra, or Howa, corresponds to othermothers, because it hinges on a relationship between mothers, rather than between a mother and child.

The presence of childless, surrogate mothers serves the purpose of broadening the notion of female genealogies. These genealogies include a wide variety of female connections and are based on affinity, affection, admiration and, sometimes, bloodlines. As in *L'Arte della Gioia*, in *Oltre Babilonia*, too, the daughter's quest for maternal love and recognition finds its answer through a network of female solidarity. While in both novels relationships between women carry out a variety of tasks, which complement the maternal function, there is also a difference in the way the maternal role is interpreted. Sapienza challenges the notion of biological motherhood replacing the traditional family pattern with new paradigms of kinship. The constellation of temporary mother-daughter bonds portrayed in *L'Arte della Gioia* suggests that the maternal tie works better when it is not based on bloodlines. Conversely, *Oltre Babilonia* interprets the biological bond in a more positive light. The presence of surrogate mothers, or othermothers, such as Bushra and Howa, does not overshadow the role and function of biological mothers. Fortuitous biological bonds are also used as a way to reinforce the connections between female characters. For instance, Zuhra and Mar are half-sisters, although this fact is unbeknown to them. Zuhra is the one who helps Mar to deal with her ethnic belonging and teaches her the “essenstial life skills”, carrying on a task that the white Miranda could never achieve. In Mar's perspective, the female models embodied by Zuhra and Miranda complement each other without conflict, while Miranda's maternal role is not belittled at all by Zuhra's presence.

The importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel is enhanced by the fact that the two dyads are isolated, especially at the beginning: no siblings, no family, no roots, no father. This choice points out the role of the mothers as the principal agents in the reconstruction of the daughters' female genealogies. Despite the distance created by psychological and physical differences, only Miranda can reconstruct Mar's personal story and cultural roots. Likewise, in spite of Howa's maternal role, only Maryam has the power and the responsibility to recreate, through her narration, the vibrant atmosphere of Zuhra's family of origin in Somalia. It is Maryam, again, who involves Elias, the father of both daughters, to play his part and retell the story of his two mothers to Zuhra and Mar. Female agency is the engine that drives and advances the narration, while absolute pre-eminence is given to the female lineage, epitomised by the fact that the daughters are effectively fatherless. Like Mar, who was given her mother's surname for obvious reasons, Zuhra, too, carries her mother's family name, in spite of being born to a married couple.

Elias's voluntary disappearance as a homodiegetic narrator is consistent with the dominant female agency within the text and with the marginal role he plays in his daughters' life. In spite of being the only one who knows all the other protagonists, and the only connection between them, Elias only plays a fortuitous, limited (although necessary) role in the conception of the daughters, and has no relevance afterwards. The father's main task is to contribute to the reconstruction of the daughters' genealogy. For this reason Elias appears only in the narrations set in the past. Even though for the novel to make sense we need him, there is no place for Elias in the present, and even less in the future, into which the novel clearly projects the female characters.

7. Hybridity as a signature style

In this tightrope walk between two types of otherness, hybridity[19] is the unsurprising outcome of a "life on the hyphen", as I have discussed earlier this chapter. Furthermore, hybridity is a conceptual category which accounts for most of Scego's choices and appears in both the content and the style of her narration. The two younger protagonists are both hybrid and through their

19 The term hybridity, originally used in biology , has been subsequently employed in numerous academic disciplines in discourses referring to multiculturalism, post-colonialism, identity, globalisation, migrant literature and others. The notion of hybridity has elicited a wide theoretical discussion among scholars whose work engages with increasing multicultural awareness and is fundamentally associated with the emergence of post-colonial discourse. My usage of the term is indebted to the definition provided by the most important theorists such as Bhabha and Hall, and focuses on the effects of mixture upon identity and culture. The work of Homi K. Bhabha focuses on the concept of cultural hybridity as a way of explaining how members of a former colonised people build and develop their sense of identity. The outcome of this process of identity construction is the development of multicultural societies exceeding a particular national location.
For a further discussion see: S. Hall, 'New Ethnicities' in '*Race', Culture and Difference*, ed. by J. Donald and A. Rattansi (London: Sage, 1992), p. 252-259; H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, and R. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* London: Routledge, 1995.

experience Scego problematises the intricacies of a multiple belonging. Zuhra's hybridism is mainly cultural. Her double cultural identity is further enriched by new cultural horizons. Being Italian and Somali, Zuhra is studying Brazilian literature, so that her multiculturalism widens into a form of cosmopolitanism. Her attraction to Latin-American culture is something that Zuhra has in common with her half-sister Mar and with Miranda. Conversely, Mar's hybridism is mainly physical and highly problematic. Despite her skin colour, Mar has no contact with her Somali roots and her African origins. The idea of her first trip to Africa elicits in her thoughts of indifference and disgust: "A lei degli arabi, dell'arabo [...] non gliene fregava nulla. Tunisi, poi, le risultava indigesta come un piatto di calamari fritti male" (71). Culturally, Mar belongs to her accidental place of birth, even though she is mysteriously attracted to her mother's Latin American culture. Her name, Mar, is the Spanish word for "sea." Miranda named her daughter after a poem written by the Spanish writer Rafael Alberti. This uncommon cultural richness, however, is experienced by Mar as a source of deep discomfort that affects both her physical self-perception and her cultural identity:

> Sono frutto del terzo mondo, un padre negro, una madre figlia di terroni. Pigmentata da macchie di schiavitù e spoliazione. Sono terra di conquista. Terra da calpestare. Frutto ibrido senza colore. Senza collocazione. Una mezzosangue che non appartiene a nulla […] Seminegra. Mi vergogno (388-9).

Her multiple belonging becomes, in her eyes, a half belonging, or a lack of belonging at all ("una mezzosangue che non appartiene a nulla") and leads Mar to consider herself as a diminished human being, as "frutto ibrido senza colore." Having different traditions and ethnicities in both her cultural and genetic history, Mar feels she belongs wholly to neither:[20]

> Mar si sentiva una zebra. Ma non una di quelle in cui ogni linea era distinta dall'altra con un confine netto di separazione. Non era una zebra tradizionale della savana africana. Mar si sentiva una zebra messa in lavatrice in cui ogni bianco e ogni nero si erano sporcati della *nuance* dell'altro. Una sfumatura. Una virgola di colore. Non le piaceva molto essere così. Non era nulla. Non era nera. Non era bianca (329).

20 The issue of multiple belonging as a difficulty rather than a source of richness is not new in Italian literature written by migrants. As Comberiati states, "l'impossibilità di uniformarsi al colore della cultura dominante o, al limite, al colore della cultura accettata, diventa il simbolo di un carattere in transizione e di una personalità non ancora formata" (69-70). However, what is new in Scego's work is that Mar and Zuhra move beyond the black/white dichotomy and, in spite of their hybridity and blackness, make an effort to develop their identity as black Italians. See Caterina Romeo, "Rappresentazioni di Razza e Nerezza in Vent'Anni di Letteratura Post-coloniale" in *Leggere il Testo e il Mondo. Vent'Anni di Scritture della Migrazione in Italia*, eds F.Pezzarossa and I.Rossini (2011), Alessandro Portelli "Le Origini della Letteratura Afro-Italiana e l'Esempio Afroamericano" in *L'Ospite Ingrato*, No. 3, 2001, p. 69-86 and De Robertis R. "Insorgenze letterarie nella disseminazione delle migrazioni. Contesti, definizioni e politiche culturali delle scritture migranti", in *Scritture Migranti*, No. 1, 2007, p. 27-52.

Mar's attitude towards her physical self and her multiple belonging is very different from Zuhra's. Zuhra refers to her being African playfully appropriating stereotyped images: “Che bel fisico, che eleganza. Siamo somale, si sa che siamo belle!” (81). In spite of the difficulties of being a black Italian woman within a white majority, (40) Zuhra does not perceive her blackness as a fault. She may stumble between her two belongings, but she is very proud of both. Consistently, the two half-sisters have a very different attitude toward the whiteness of other characters. Dissatisfied with her blackness, Mar is obsessively attracted to extremely white-skinned women, whom she describes with awe. One of these women, observed through Zuhra's eyes, loses her charms and becomes: “Una donna pallida [...] 'na morta […] Morta più di Ofelia e Virginia Woolf suicide insieme [...] Questa cuginetta di Morticia […]” (340). Such a different attitude towards the condition of being Black confirms, once more, that the identification with the maternal figure for a daughter is crucial for the formation of a sense of self, as discussed in the previous sections and in Chapter 1. Mar, having a white mother, cannot identify with her, and this lack of identification painfully affects her self-perception.

Hybridity and cross-pollination of languages and styles also characterise the narrating voices, although to different extents. For instance, Zuhra's Italian is often contaminated by different local jargons, among which her Somali springs out in order to provide different shades of meaning and tone: playful (“wallahi billahi”), tragic (“eeb”) or affectionate (“abbayo”). Miranda, the multicultural poet, commits her storytelling to her notebooks in a language that does not stand out for its refinement, but rather for the constant presence of Spanish and other non Italian words, which serve as a reminder of her hybrid origin. On the contrary, Mar's language is the most homogeneous, due to the fact that her story is narrated in the third person, a choice which allows a certain distance between the narrating voice and the emotional impact of the events. However, especially when the focalisation is internal, traces of her unwanted double belonging surface unwittingly in her linguistic choices. The hybridity that characterises the language of Scego's characters, which is mainly achieved through the switching of registers and codes, gives place to a phenomenon which Gloria Anzaldua describes as a *mestiza*, that is, “the language of the Borderlands,” (20) a language located at the juncture of cultures. In fact, linguistic elements that do not belong to standard Italian are scattered throughout the text. In order to create the effect of *mestiza*, Scego draws from dialects, languages other than Italian (Spanish, Somali, Arabic, English) and jargons, as well as mixing together formal and informal registers. These linguistic elements function as “tensors”, that is, words and combinations of words, generally found in the tongue of a minor literature, whose purpose is to “express the inner tensions of a language” (Deleuze and Guattari, 22).

The contamination of registers in the terms used when referring to race and ethnic belonging produces a number of examples of linguistic "tensors". While the white Miranda pays little or no attention to this physical aspect, the other narrating voices resort to various linguistic solutions to refer to their skin colour. The most striking is the use of the word "negra/o," an unmistakably derogatory term. Scego uses it in Zuhra's, Mar's and Maryam's discourse.

Zuhra's use of this term is very effective. Aware of its offensive implications, she uses it only by antiphrasis, in order to highlight the racism pervading Italian and European society. This happens, for instance, when she uses the term "negri saraceni" to refer to people who are black and Muslim, feeling that these two conditions might affect, in the eyes of the others, her Italian-ness (40). Through the character of Zuhra, the author is purposefully appropriating a word with a clearly offensive meaning, while Zuhra herself calls herself "negra" (344-5). In doing so, Scego follows the path opened by sociologist Genevieve Makaping, who, in her autobiographical text *Traiettorie di Sguardi. E se gli Altri Foste Voi?* (2001) radically rejects the various Italian terms for her race on the basis that she wants to be the one who decides what to be called: "Io non sono una 'donna di colore'. Sono una Negra" (38). As a novel, *Oltre Babilonia*, while belonging to a different genre, deploys a similar strategy. Maryam, who is almost illiterate, does not understand the nuances of the word, which she uses in its literal meaning: "Per mamma i negri sono quelli più scuri di lei" (40). As for Mar, the problematic relationship to her physical hybridity affects also her linguistic choices when it comes to race. Compared to Zuhra, Mar has a much less clear-sighted vision of the power of language, in spite of her refined education. When the third person narrating voice assumes Mar's point of view, the term "negro/a" often upholds its originally derogatory nuance: "Le faceva strano vedere sua madre in compagnia di un'altra *negra*" (167, *emphasis mine*), where the offensive word "negra" is referred to Zuhra who is talking to Miranda. When Mar meets Zuhra, her attitude undergoes an evolution: "Forse non dovrei dire negro, ma nero. Ma non m'importa, me l'hai insegnato tu, Zuhra Laamane, abbayo, che non si deve avere paura delle parole" (389). Through her characters' linguistic choices in relation to race, Scego defuses the offensive charge of Italian language while challenging linguistic stereotypes. As the author explains in an interview: "Ti appropri di quella parola orrenda che ti scagliano in faccia per offenderti e ne fai una bandiera."[21]

Each of the five principle characters in Scego's novel has a nickname: Mar is La Nus-Nus, Zuhra is La Negropolitana, Miranda is La Reaparecida, Maryam is La pessottimista and Elias is Il Padre. As often happens with fictional characters, their nicknames are charactonyms, because they suggest some traits of their personalities. These charactonyms highlight the daughters' hybridity as their

21 In "Intervista a Igiaba Scego" di Maria Vittoria Vittori, http://www.universitadelledonne.it/vittori-scego.htm accessed (24/10/2012).

most outstanding feature. Mar's cultural and ethnic hybridity is made evident in the nickname Nus-Nus (in Somali, the "half and half"). While Nus-Nus refers to her being the daughter of a white woman and a black man, it also reflects the discomfort that such a condition causes her. As Scego explains, Mar is "a metà tra due mondi. Difficile condizione, quella degli immigrati di seconda generazione: ci trattano sempre da stranieri."[22] The word 'half' has the same meaning as the prefix "semi-", so obsessively repeated by Mar in relation to her identity: "Semi-negra? Semi-bianca? Semi-pallida? Semi-niente?" (389). Her words reflect the difficult condition of second generation migrants.

Zuhra's nickname, La Negropolitana, also hints at the complex richness of her identity, combining her unquestioned ethnic belonging with her multiculturalism. As the prefix "negro" indicates, Zuhra is a black woman, daughter of the colonised. At the same time, she is also a citizen of the most developed part of the world, as suggested by the second part of her nick name, which comes from "polites", the Ancient Greek word for citizen (that is, someone who enjoys full freedom and active citizenship) as opposed to the condition of servant and subject.

While the daughters' nicknames emphasise both their physical and cultural diversity, the older characters' nicknames focus on other aspects, such as their narrative function or their complex personalities. Miranda is "La reaparecida", the woman who reappeared, a sort of antonym of the notorious, frightening term "desaparecida." Her nickname hints at her shadowy past, at her Argentinean origin, at the 'disappearance' of her brother in the torture chambers of Argentinean dictatorship, and at her own resurfacing as a woman, as a mother and as a human being. Maryam is "La Pessottimista." Paying homage to "the Pessoptimist", a character created by the Palestinian writer Emil Habibi,[23] Maryam's charactonym refers to her transition from passivity and despair towards the decision to play an active role in recovering the bond with her daughter. Elias is simply "Il padre", the father, a choice which dryly points out his biological role and narrative function, excluding any extra layer of meaning.

The title of the book also hints at linguistic and cultural hybridism. On the one hand it draws our attention to the difficulties experienced by all the characters in the construction of a mutual dialogue, while on the other hand it is prefiguring a new pattern of communication (and of society). According to the explanation provided by Zuhra in the last chapter, *Oltre Babilonia* summarises her desperate wish to move beyond the sorrow of her present condition:

22 In "Intervista a Igiaba Scego" di Maria Vittoria Vittori, http://www.universitadelledonne.it/vittori-scego.htm accessed (24/10/2012).

23 "[Maryam] è la Pessottimista, in omaggio all'omonimo libro di Emil Habibi. Palestinesi e somali si somigliano moltissimo, i primi non hanno una patria, gli altri ce l'hanno, ma è un territorio senza governo." in "Il modello è la lingua: contaminare e mescolare per includere" in "Intervista a Igiaba Scego" di Maria Vittoria Vittori, http://www.universitadelledonne.it/vittori-scego.htm accessed (24/10/2012).

> Oltre Babilonia era una frase che mi ero inventata al liceo. Avevo il ciclo. Niente ora di educazione fisica. Con me, sedute nell'angolo delle mestruate, due ragazze della classe avanti alla mia. Non parlavano molto con me […] Improvvisamente, non so chi delle due disse qualcosa su Bob Marley e Babylon. Disse che Babylon era tutto quanto di peggio possa esistere al mondo. La feccia, il vomito, lo schifo, il dolore. Non so, nel silenzio della mia testa pensai che avrei tanto voluto vivere oltre Babilonia (449-50).

However, if we relate the meaning of the title to the biblical image of the town, Babylon[24], where people spoke too many different languages and were not able to understand each other, Babylon becomes a metaphor for the entanglement in which these mothers and daughters are trapped at the onset of the narration. Beyond Babylon hints, therefore, at the evolution that takes place in the novel, from the initial paralyzing inability to communicate, toward a blossoming dialogue between mothers and daughters.

For all the reasons discussed so far, the label of 'migrant writer' for Scego is particularly limited.[25] Being “somala per nascita, italiana per vocazione,” (Interview with Maria Cristina Mauceri, 2004) Scego reflects the richness and complexity of her status in the identities of her characters. Staging as protagonists a Somali mother, an Italian-Somali daughter, an Italian-Somali-Argentinean daughter and an Argentinean-Italian-Portuguese mother, the writer moves beyond the migrant dichotomies, by fictionalising the most recent developments of the society in which she lives.

8. Conclusion

The fictional world of *Oltre Babilonia* offers new paradigms to interpret the social and cultural evolution of contemporary Italy. The distinctive feature of this emerging society is that cultural and ethnic diversities, as well as women's relationships, traditionally overshadowed by a male-centred hegemonic culture, are no longer at the margins. As migrants, and as women, the protagonists are “precariously positioned at the interstices of different spaces, histories, and languages” (Seyan 4). This ex-centric position allows for a different gaze on society, which coincides with the perspective

24 Babylon is the Greek name of the Akkadian city state founded in the ancient Mesopotamia at the beginning of the second millemium BC. It is also known as Babel in the Hebrew Bible.

25 The analytical tools developed in the field of migrant literature best applies to Scego's previous works, in which the writer locates herself at a crossroads between two identities. “Scego's writing offers us the opportunity to examine, at its very inception, a novel phenomenon in the Italian cultural landscape. While the literature of post-migration is already a vital component of other literary worlds, it is still at the 'embryonic stage' in Italy. Italy, in fact, has not yet seen the emergence of second-generation writers born out of the migrant experience, who can play an 'increasingly prominent role in shaping the development of erstwhile “pure” national (and international) literatures” (Sartini Blum, 250).

from which many Italian women writers speak. As an Italian woman writer, Scego, too, writes from within a male-centred culture and in a language that articulates woman as Other.

Oltre Babilonia's youngest protagonists, Mar and Zuhra, both black Italian citizens, both hybrid daughters of a post-colonial era, while counterpointing what Piera Carroli defines as "narrow depictions of Italianness," (206) are on the verge of discovering a new alliance with their mothers. Through her novel Scego questions and disrupts the mother-daughter dyad, allowing for its reconstruction on a different basis. By doing so, Scego confronts what Nancy Miller calls "transnational transformation," (25) that is, a process in which "family ties are both suspended and reforged"(25) after the separation produced by migration, displacement or exile. For its ability to capture multiple diversities and articulate them into the Italian cultural landscape, *Oltre Babilonia* offers a broader meditation on contemporary Italian society and a reappraisal of some of its most crippling and contradictory aspects.

Oltre Babilonia constitutes, indeed, a fascinating answer to Adrienne Rich's wish for "a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course" (225). However, even though many years separate the writings of Rich from Scego's, *Oltre Babilonia* demonstrates that women are still addressing the same issues: no matter how many social and political changes have occurred, apparently the wound generated by the severed bond is still hurting and, as Scego suggests, reconciliation, although possible and longed for, will not be an easy process.

Scego is not the only Italian woman writer to engage with the task of reconstructing the mother-daughter bond outside patriarchal constraints. As I show in the following chapter, Valeria Parrella's *Lo Spazio Bianco*, suggests a different way of imagining "a world in which strong mothers and strong daughters will be a matter of course".

CHAPTER 4.
Woman, mother and daughter. A white space of unexplored possibilities in Valeria Parrella's Lo Spazio Bianco

"Trovo qualcosa per abbattere l'imbarazzo di essere madre e figlia,
di essere uscita l'una dall'altra per poi esserci separate..

Qualcosa che azzeri la meraviglia di rincontrarsi [...]

Dopo quasi quarant'anni questa cosa mi sorprende, mi scuote le fibre

come se stessi nascendo ora,

come se non continuassimo a vivere quando non ci vediamo."

(Parrella, 2005: 77)

During the last decade Valeria Parrella (b. 1974) has gained a remarkable place in the Italian cultural landscape. Born in Naples, where most of her works are set, Valeria Parrella (1974) made her debut as a writer with a collection of short stories, *Mosca più Balena* (2003), for which she was awarded the Campiello Prize for the best new writer and the Amelia Rosselli Prize, among others. In the following years Parrella published further anthologies. *Per Grazia Ricevuta* (2005) was short-listed for the prestigious Strega Prize and won two awards: the Renato Fucini Prize for short stories, as well as the Zerilli-Marimò Prize. In 2008 Parrella published her first and most successful novel, *Lo Spazio Bianco* (The White Space). The complexity of the female protagonist attracted the attention of film director Francesca Comencini, who based her film *Lo Spazio Bianco* (2009) on Parrella's novel. The film entered the official competition at the Venice Film Festival in 2009 and was widely appreciated by critics and public. It was awarded the Fedic Prize, the Pasinetti Prize and the Pro Life Prize. The following works by Parrella, *Il Verdetto* (2007), *Ciao Maschio* (2009), *Ma Quale Amore* (2010), which was awarded the Tomasi di Lampedusa Prize, and *Lettera di Dimissioni* (2011) also deal with female protagonists challenging cultural and social conventions. Some of her collections of short stories, such as *Mosca Più Balena* (2003) and *Per Grazia Ricevuta* (2005), have been translated into Spanish, German and English, while *Lo Spazio Bianco* has been

translated into French and German.[1]

A unifying feature of Parrella's writing is that it portrays how Italian women try to fulfill their desires and ambitions within a society which, in many respects, is still conservative and hostile to women. Some of her previous works deal with mother-daughter dynamics, such as the monologue *Il Verdetto* (2009), and *Per Grazia Ricevuta.* The former is a modernised version of the myth of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, narrated by her mother Clytemnestra. The latter is a short story after which the whole collection is named (2005) and in which the author depicts an adult daughter and her relationship with her mother.

Lo Spazio Bianco problematises the interconnectedness of a woman's identity as both mother and daughter and explores how the complexities of the mother-daughter bond shape and are shaped by the experience of motherhood. For the protagonist of *Lo Spazio Bianco*, becoming a mother entails coming to terms with her own mother-figure and simultaneously interrogating her own identity as a daughter in search of the kind of mother she wants to be. The tone of the novel combines a disillusioned observation of the reality experienced by the protagonist with a light touch of humour, as the author tackles life and death, pain and joy, discouragement and hope.

Set in Naples, the narration gives voice to a first-time mother, Maria, whose daughter, Irene, is born premature. Following the birth, mother and daughter spend months in the hospital enduring a long wait. While the little one is struggling between life and death, Maria interrogates herself about the place that her newly acquired identity as a mother will have in her life, if the baby survives. Combining the memory of her past experience as a daughter with a meditation on her present and future role as a mother, Maria reflects on how she will accommodate her multiple roles as a woman, single-mother and adult daughter. As an independent woman, some years earlier Maria had made the choice to live her life independently of men. Consequently, all the choices related to the roles of reproduction, motherhood and parenting flow from that initial decision. The narrated events span less than a year and are related and examined in the protagonist's long running interior dialogue.

Lo Spazio Bianco was published in 2008, the same year as both *L'Arte della Gioia*'s successful reappearance in Italy and the publication of *Oltre Babilonia*. Like the novels previously analysed, *Lo Spazio Bianco*, too, tackles the mother-daughter bond in relation to the experience of motherhood. Instead of the rich interplay of mothers and daughters characterising Sapienza's and Scego's novels, here we have one character who embodies both the mother's and the daughter's point of view. While Sapienza and Scego explore a variety of mother-daughter relationships, beyond biological bonds and ethnic boundaries, Parrella concentrates exclusively on the two

1 French edition: V. Parrella, *Le Temps Suspendu*, trans. Dominique Vittoz, Editions du Seuil, 2010. German edition: V. Parrella, *Zeit des Wartens*, trans. Anja Nattefort, C.Bertelsmann, 2009.

mother-daughter dyads that Maria forms respectively with her daughter and her mother. The narration focuses on the very moment when the protagonist is becoming a mother and explores her transition towards motherhood. While Sapienza's women, and particularly her protagonist, are exceptional individuals dealing with extraordinary and sometimes extreme situations, Parrella's heroine has the features and the opportunities common to many Italian women of her age and time. Maria supports herself by working as a teacher of poor illiterate working-class men and women. Teaching is a very female-dominated profession in Italy. The uncovnetionality of her choices marks the difference between her and her peers. In spite of her decision to be self-sufficient and never depend on a man, she represents nevertheless an approachable model to average Italian women, who can mirror themselves in Maria by virtue of her humble social background and the profession she has chosen. It is only the unconventionality of her choices that marks the difference between Maria and her peers.

1. Mother and daughter: two sides of the same coin?

The novel begins with Maria's considerations about how to define Irene's condition: “Il fatto è che mia figlia Irene stava morendo, o nascendo, non ho capito bene: per quaranta giorni è stato come nominare la stessa condizione” (9). Born at six months of gestation, kept in a humid-crib, tiny, vulnerable and unaware, Irene represents literally and metaphorically Maria's chance to be a mother. If her daughter dies, Maria's identity as a mother will also come to an end. There is no category to define Irene, who, according to Maria's attempt to label her, is not yet a daughter, but “una forma senza immagine, un atto vivente che dietro di sé non aveva nessuna idea platonica a sorreggerlo” (28). Likewise Maria does not enjoy the status of mother, but sees herself as an empty silhouette: “Io non ero una madre, io ero un buco vuoto” (28). While waiting for Irene to be fully born, that is, autonomously alive, Maria attempts to build her own identity as a mother. The white space after which the book is named is the limbo in which both Maria and Irene are trapped, as yet-to-be mother and daughter.

Lo Spazio Bianco explores how the experiences of becoming a mother and relating to a mother are intrinsically correlated. In the novel, the mother-daughter relationship is observed through the experience of motherhood which, as a mirror, reproduces and multiplies indefinitely the image of the woman facing it. In this mirror, Maria observes and interrogates both the reflections of her mother and of herself as a mother.

The specularity of the maternal and filial roles in the mother-daughter bond, investigated by thinkers and literary critics such as Sambuco (2012), Giorgio (2002), Muraro (1991), Hirsch (1989),

Rich (1976) and others, already appears in *L'Arte della Gioia* and *Oltre Babilonia*. In Sapienza's novel Modesta explores both sides of the coin, first as a daughter and then as a mother. Having searched for supportive mothers during her apprenticeship in life, Modesta decides to be for her daughters the kind of mother she could not find in her maternal figures: a non-patriarchal mother, who is subject of desire, and whose main goal is to help other women to fulfill their own desires. In Scego's novel the two mothers and the two daughters are caught up in the effort to talk to each other, in a mutual effort to retell each other's personal stories and to reconstruct a female genealogy so far denied to them. What is different in *Lo Spazio Bianco* is that the two roles coexist simultaneously within the same character. Maria is a daughter in the relationship with her (dead) mother, and a mother in relation to Irene. As two voices emanating from the same body, the mother and the daughter she embodies gain subjectivity in equal measure. However, the fact that this balance is only made possible by the experience of motherhood, produces the effect of emphasising Maria's role as a mother, so that *Lo Spazio Bianco* subverts "the traditional difficulty of seeing motherhood from the point of view of the mother" (5) discussed by Benedetti.

The coincidence of the maternal and filial roles is skillfully supported by the narrative structure. The account of Maria's pregnancy and of Irene's struggle for life alternates with the memories of Maria's childhood and early youth. As the narration moves from the present to the past and back again to the present, two distinct narrative plans overlap and dovetail. The double-layered structure of the plot mirrors the dual nature of Maria's position, who speaks alternatively as a daughter and as a mother.

According to several scholars (Hirsch, 1989; Giorgio, 2002, Benedetti, 2007), the coexistence of these two roles in the same character is quite unusual, because of two opposing tendencies that operate in the mother-daughter dynamics. On the one hand, feminist theoretical studies on the socio-symbolic meanings of motherhood in Western Culture have demonstrated how the role of mother generally engulfs any other aspect of a woman's personality, including the role of daughter, as I have already discussed in Chapter 1. On the other hand, literary critics, such as Sambuco (2012), Benedetti (2007) and Giorgio (2002) remark how Italian women writers have generally put a greater emphasis on the daughter's perspective in the representation of the mother-daughter bond. In Chapter 1, I have evidenced how, from the 1980s onwards, several women writers engage with the representation of the mother-daughter bond observed and narrated from the point of view of the adult daughter.

The outcome of these two opposing tendencies is that, in spite of the great importance attached to the maternal, the mother has no subjectivity. *Lo Spazio Bianc*o, instead, eschews the risks implicit in the representation of the mother-daughter relationship, that is, the objectification of the

mother, as well as the erasure of one figure at the expense of the other. By giving subjectivity to only one woman, who is located at the centre of the narration as a mother and as a daughter, Parrella's novel subverts the idea that "l'identificazione col ruolo materno spesso cancella il ruolo di figlia," (Cavarero, 2007, 46). However, it is Maria's maternal role that challenges the traditional representation of the mother-daughter bond. While motherhood is depicted as one possibility among others, it also becomes a necessary element for the mother-daughter relationship to be re-thought and re-shaped.

After the birth of Irene, Maria is involved in two mother-daughter relationships. Unlike *Oltre Babilonia*, where the parallel subjectivity of mothers and daughters is carried out through an interplay of different voices, here the narratorial voice belongs exclusively to one woman. All the other female figures of the novel are seen exclusively through Maria's eyes and words. Being simultaneously in two mother-daughter dyads, Maria is the only one who gains subjectivity, while the other figure of each dyad (her mother and Irene respectively) is silent. Maria's isolated subjectivity is highlighted by the fact that her mother is dead and her daughter is half born and cannot speak. Hence, the only mother-daughter dialogue that really occurs is an interior monologue.

While striving to become a fully-fledged mother, Maria feels an urge to revise the maternal model handed down to her by her own mother. In Maria's eyes her mother appears as a voluntary victim of a male-dominated system, represented by her father, a trade union activist, who, at home, acts out a different set of values from those he publicly proclaims:

> C'era una forbice troppo ampia nella mia casa di adolescente, tra le idee che mio padre contrattava al tavolo dei dirigenti di fabbrica e ci raccontava orgoglioso a cena, e i mezzucci con cui insieme a mia madre brigava perché finissi nella migliore sezione del Magistrale. E l'una cosa alimentava e nascondeva l'altra (37).

Furthermore, Maria's father fights for the rights of other (male) workers, but he is oblivious to the rights of women, especially stay-at-home mothers like his wife, who have accepted a passive state of subordination and dependence. Thus, Maria's journey towards motherhood has to begin with a rethinking of her experience as a daughter and with the rejection of the values embodied by her family of origin. Forging a meaningful metaphor, Maria defines her mother's self-annihilating attitude as a crown of thorns ("la corona di spine"), a bequest which the daughter is eager to avoid. The image is quite interesting. The "corona di spine" is a strong Catholic image and refers to the crown of thorns that Roman soldiers put on the head of Jesus during the Passion. The image of the crown of thorns epitomises a selfless sacrifice, such as the one that Christ endures for the salvation

of humankind, according to Christian theology. However, Parrella borrows the image from its original patriarchal context, re-signifies it and re-contextualises it into a female frame of reference. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 1, Catholic culture privileges the mother-son dyads and lays a definite stress on the son. From the point of view of Maria, however, the crown of thorns no longer represents the heroic suffering of the son, where the mother is a passive spectator, but signifies the suffering endured (and self-inflicted) by the mother. The spectator, this time, is the adult daughter, and the metaphor has an opposite significance. If in the original context the crown referred to a sacrifice of the self that provides salvation for humankind, in the novel the daughter looks at this sacrifice as useless and even dangerous, especially for women.

As a young woman Maria is determined to reject the role model that her mother epitomised, an effort that she considers a priority in her life: “Avevo sedici anni quando mi ero impegnata nello sforzo capillare della mia esistenza” (88). However, she is aware that this is not an easy task. Maria can lucidly identify the maternal behaviours qualifying as *la corona di spine*: “In mia madre c'era un vago compiacimento per qualunque rinuncia, una sottile perversione nel non andare al cinema, nel perdere di vista le amiche” (88). As a daughter, Maria resolutely refuses to replicate this self-inflicted humiliation, memory of which resurfaces in her account over and over again: “Quando si truccava proclamava a gran voce oltre la porta del bagno che lo faceva controvoglia” (88-9).

Maria also rejects her mother's subjection to a man. On the contrary, she wants to be free and self-sufficient. A passage that sheds light on Maria's attitude towards her maternal model is the one in which she remembers her mother's decision to quit driving in order to please her husband, preferring to be dependent on her husband once more rather than upset him, or betray what she believed to be her wifely role: “Mia madre era una donna che sapeva con certezza che, finché ci fosse stato un marito, quel marito l'avrebbe accompagnata” (49). This woman is ready to give up her little autonomy in exchange for company, safety, protection. Conversely, the young Maria fantasises different choices: “Pensavo [...] al giorno in cui avrei avuto, io, una macchina che andava a super, io sarei stata una donna che guidava” (52). Maria's mother is entirely defined by her roles as wife and mother. Maria's identity, instead, is not defined by her reproductive power, as is witnessed by her unexpected experience of motherhood: “Irene era arrivata quando nessuno se l'aspettava più. Per esempio quando io avevo già 42 anni e fumavo 20 rosse al giorno dalla maggiore età” (15). Breaking the maternal mould entails a fundamental consequence for Maria; she gains the freedom to become both the woman and the mother she wants to be. In other words, she conquers the ability to interpret the maternal role in an unconventional way, consistent with her identity as a woman and according to her own liking.

The self-sacrificing attitude characterising Maria's mother, which is transmitted from mother to

daughter through generations of women, has often been depicted as a typical maternal feature. In Chapter 1 I have already examined how, during the last century, several female-authored novels have represented gifted, strong-minded women whose identity and talent are swallowed up by their maternal role. In *Lo Spazio Bianco* Maria disentangles motherhood from both the idea of self-sacrifice and from maternal legacy. In fact, it is the protagonist's strong cultural and social identity which helps her to face the difficulties connected to her newly acquired role as a mother. Not only does Maria break what Aleramo called the 'chain of maternal enslavement', but also that more subtle connection between mother and daughter consisting in admiration, identification and resentment, as portrayed by several women writers especially during the 1980s and 1990s. As in these novels, in *Lo Spazio Bianco*, too, an adult daughter is reconstructing the image of her dead mother which calls into question a deep critique of patriarchy. However, in Parrella's work the daughter's recollection of the relationship with the mother does not lead to "a sense of corporeal identity" (Sambuco, 9) linking mother and daughter, but rather highlights the insurmountable gap between the two.

Lo Spazio Bianco also differs from most of the novels hinged on the mother-daughter plot in regard to the attitude of the protagonist towards her daughter, including the novels examined in the previous chapters. After breaking the chain of maternal enslavement, the protagonist of *Una Donna* cannot become the kind of mother she wanted to be, even if she wants to, because she loses her only child (and, by the way, the child is a son). As the mother of a biological son, Modesta has to adopt daughters, who are not biologically related to her, in order to reforge the maternal bond according to her own liking. In *Lo Spazio Bianco* Maria has a biological daughter, a circumstance that enables her to break the mould of her maternal model twice, by refusing to comply with that model and then to transmit it, in a new form, to Irene. Having interrupted the transmission of those patriarchal values from her mother, Maria seems eager to start a different relationship with Irene from the one she experienced as a daughter. Hence, the *spazio bianco* works as a metaphor, alluding to the place where women can choose not to be like their mothers.

If previously women of different social classes have played a pivotal role in perpetuating their oppression through the mother-daughter bond as a privileged means of transmission of maternal abnegation[2], *Lo Spazio Bianco* suggests that women can interrupt this cycle. Drawing from Nancy Chodorow's notion (1979) that mothering is the reproduction of oneself as daughter and as woman, I argue that *Lo Spazio Bianco* works as an example of a daughter constructing herself as both a woman and as a mother not simply in relation to her mother, nor in opposition to her, but beyond

2 In her best-known essay *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1979) Nancy Chodorow analyses the reproduction of mothering as a constituting element in the social organisation and reproduction of gender which occurs through socially constructed psychological processes. According to the author, women's mothering reproduces itself cyclically, being neither a product of biology nor of intentional role-training (7).

the maternal model and the mother-daughter relationship she has previously experienced.

2. Literary influences, matérnage and female genealogies

As Maria questions the model embodied by her mother, similarly the author interrogates the texts of other women writers in a relation of literary *matérnage*. In *Lo Spazio Bianco* Parrella engages with the same question tackled by Oriana Fallaci in *Lettera ad un Bambino Mai Nato* (1975): Can motherhood find its place in the life of an independent woman? And at what price? The two female-authored texts reveal a continuity that is unexpected. In spite of the difference in style, social and generational background and personal commitment, both authors produce a text that deals with very similar issues, following a pattern of relationship between women writers that Giorgio defines as "the corrective and conflictual nature of inter-female intertextuality" (2007: 13).

Italian feminist thinkers and literary critics provide useful insights and theoretical tools for the comparative analysis of the two works. From Stefania Lucamante (2007) I draw the notion of literary entrustment. As explained in Chapter 1, the notion of literary entrustment extends to the field of textual analysis a concept developed by Muraro (1991), the Women's Collective Bookstore (1987) and the philosophical community Diotima (1987) as a political and relational practice between women.[3] The practice of entrustment, or *affidamento*, "establishes a paradigm of women's relations connecting 'weaker' and 'stronger' women" (Parati, 2002: 19) so that the two form an elective mother-daughter relationship. Even though in real life the practice of entrustment has revealed its limits[4], in fiction it works well and is particularly appropriate to the field of literary criticism. According to Lucamante, "without entrustment there is no example to take [...] no model to follow" (34) in that it opens the door "to accommodate the problematic aspect of women writers facing the example and legacy of other women writers" (34). In Chapter 2 I have already used the notion of entrustment as an analytical tool to interpret the relationships between women in *L'Arte della Gioia*. Now I borrow it again, not in relation to fictional characters, but as a way of analysing relationships between women writers.

The Italian philosopher Ida Dominijanni (2002) hypothesises the existence of a different mode of relationship between women, which she defines as a "legame di pensiero" (191). This legacy of thought refers to the ability of women of a younger generation to question, reread and freely

3 Muraro (1991) first theorised the practice of *affidamento* as a first step toward the creation of a symbolic order of the mother. See also: Bono and Kemp (1991), Parati (2002) and Cavarero (2002).

4 In her contribution to *Le Filosofie Femministe* (2002) Cavarero explains the risks implicit in the hierarchical structure of entrustment. In her overview of Italian Feminist Thought, Parati (2002) widely illustrates the limits and pitfalls of Muraro's notion of entrustment. Since it is based on an unequal relationship, *affidamento* can turn into "another unproductive form of authority among women" (Lucamante, 34).

reinterpret the work of women belonging to previous generations, bestowing authority on them. In this way, they activate a process that Dominijanni defines as “la costruzione di un legame di pensiero con le donne che ci hanno preceduto” (191). Although reminiscent of entrustment for the asymmetrical bond between two women, the “legame di pensiero” is less problematic because it is not hierarchical and easily applies to women writers too.

Under this lens, *Lo Spazio Bianco* appears as a contemporary exploration of the issues raised during the 1970s in *Lettera*. My aim here is to demonstrate that Parrella has built her own “legame di pensiero” with some chosen predecessors and with Fallaci in particular. In fact, even if there is not an open acknowledgment of Parrella's reference to Fallaci, the affinity in themes, structure and length allows us draw a parallel between the two works and to reflect on the evolution that has occurred in Italian society during the last three decades.

Both texts are relatively short and hinge entirely on a female character who is about to become a mother, as the result of an unplanned pregnancy. Neither protagonist depicts motherhood as an unavoidable destiny for women. Both authors opt for a simple narrative structure based on a first-person account. Far from the audacious double-focused narration adopted in Sapienza's *L'Arte della Gioia*, and unlike the polyphonic construction of Scego's *Oltre Babilonia*, *Lo Spazio Bianco* presents only one narrating voice, as does Fallaci's novel. In fact, in spite of the title, *Lettera* is not a letter, but is rather a diary in which the mother, under the pretext of addressing her unborn baby, exposes her anxiety and the troubles she is experiencing in her attempt to combine motherhood (i.e. pregnancy) and freedom.

The two novels imply a significant change in the social and cultural context in which their authors are grounded. To begin with, both mothers are independent (economically and emotionally) and alone in their experience of pregnancy. However, in the pursuit of her unconventional idea of motherhood, Fallaci's heroine risks her identity, her independence, her job, finally her life and looses everything. On the contrary, in Parrella's text, the only thing at risk for Maria is the life of her daughter and, consequently, her role as a mother. Unlike the protagonist of *Lettera*, Maria's newly acquired status as a mother has not cancelled her identity and desires as a woman. She feels entitled to have a sexual life, a job, an existence, of which her maternal role is only a part.

In both novels the woman discovers that her pregnancy is not uneventful, entailing an unexpected lack of control over her body and life. However, the difference in the cultural perspectives underlying the two texts is remarkable. In *Lo Spazio Bianco*, Irene's premature birth jeopardizes Maria's emotions and self-perception, but does not threaten her life or freedom. Unlike the woman addressing her unborn child in Fallaci's *Lettera*, no one is questioning Maria's choices, and her reproductive function is no hindrance to her physical survival. Despite all the difficulties,

Irene's unexpected arrival provides Maria with an extraordinary opportunity, that is, to become a mother and to experience a new sense of self. Motherhood might be a risky, uncontrollable and overwhelming experience, as for Fallaci's protagonist, but it does not erase Maria's rights as a human being.

The comparative investigation of the two novels unveils how the options available to Italian women have changed and how literature has interpreted and witnessed such evolution. In *Lettera*, a nameless woman faces the dilemma of carrying on her pregnancy at the price of renouncing her own career and freedom. Her struggle against prejudices and patriarchal society is presented under the form of a conversation with her unborn child. The first-person account allows the protagonist to reveal all of her weakness, while claiming her right to experience motherhood outside the traditionally allotted role of self-sacrificial mother and wife. She is an independent woman, ambitious and proud of her job, which is the base of her economic independence: “Io ho altri doveri verso la vita. Ho un lavoro che mi piace e intendo farlo. Ho un futuro che mi aspetta e non intendo abbandonarlo” (57). The protagonist does not need to be a mother in order to define her identity as a woman. She firmly rejects the idea of pregnancy as a woman's primary identity: “Sono una donna che lavora: ho tanti altri impegni e curiosità. Te l'ho già detto che non ho bisogno di te” (8). When she decides to take the responsibility of giving life, she is conscious of the risks she is taking. These risks become evident very soon. From the beginning, she meets with stubborn opposition from her partner, her boss, the doctors and, in general, the society in which she lives. Despite her courage and the support of a few figures, her struggle is doomed to fail and she dies as a consequence of her miscarriage. The baby's death entails the mother's death[5], as a sort of divine punishment.

This ending contradicts all the apparent claims for freedom and self-determination made by the protagonist, since it implies that, in spite of all her efforts, a woman's reproductive function prevails over her other roles and qualities. Therefore, the miscarriage (that is, the failure of becoming a biological mother) leads naturally to the end of the woman's life. As Benedetti argues referring to this novel, “however resisted and rejected, motherhood had indeed become a life-defining experience for the protagonist, whose power to generate malignantly turns into the curse of self-annihilation” (93). In spite of the protagonist's claims for emancipation, the ambiguity of this

5 The ambiguity of Fallaci's message is enhanced by an editorial detail regarding its ending. In the first 36 editions, the last sentences of the novel did not state clearly that the mother would die too as a consequence of the embryo's death: “Tu sei morto. *Forse* adesso muoio anch'io. Ma non conta. Perché la vita non muore” (*emphasis mine*). In the revised edition, however, the author modifies the meaning of last sentence: “Tu sei morto. *Adesso* muoio anch'io. Ma non conta. Perché la vita non muore”. In this second case it is clear that the mother dies. A few years later the author gives an account of her decision to change the last sentences. The first version of the ending was influenced by her partner at the time. While Fallaci's intention was to make the mother die together with the child, her partner, who was also a poet, suggested a less neat ending for the story. According to Fallaci, the revised and final version is the restoration of her original idea. See: “Francesco Cevasco intervista Oriana Fallaci”, Corriere della Sera, 21 Settembre 1993, published as an appendix to the revised edition of the novel (2009).

ending is quite consistent with the system of values the protagonist (and the author, as I will show) unwittingly reveals. Through her words, a patriarchal vision of motherhood as a woman's self-sacrifice seeps out: “Mi prendo la responsabilità della scelta. Me la prendo senza egoismo, bambino: metterti al mondo, giuro, non mi diverte” (7). Her discourse emphasises the idea of maternity as a painful duty (“non mi diverte”) and an agony (56), rather than a free and joyful choice inspired by love.

The protagonist of *Lettera* fights against the idea that the female body has reproduction as its primary function, to which any other activity has to be subordinated. However, she ends up being deprived of her physical self. Because of the complications that arose during her pregnancy, she is forced to stay in bed and stop working, as she gradually loses control over her body. The protagonist and narrator meditates on the terrible implications of her choice:

> Perché dovrei sopportare una tale agonia? [...] in nome di che cosa? In nome della vita? E va bene, la vita. Ma cos'è questa vita per cui tu, che esisti non ancora fatto, conti più di me che esisto già fatta? Cos'è questo rispetto per te che toglie rispetto a me? Cos'è questo tuo diritto di esistere che non tiene conto del mio diritto ad esistere? (56).

Even though the discussion over abortion is not openly referred to, these last words echo the contemporary debate about abortion and women's freedom of choice. In an interview with Nazareno Fabretti published as an appendix to *Lettera*, Fallaci reasserts this gloomy idea of motherhood, in which the priority is given to life, meant as the embryo's life, at the expense of a woman's desires and happiness: “L'importante è affermare la vita, senza pretendere, come dicevo, la felicità” (2009: 112). This statement is consistent with the ending of the novel. In fact, one of the reasons for its controversial reception is that *Lettera* is open to different interpretations, including the idea of motherhood as an unavoidable destiny for women. If the death of the mother is consequential to the death of the embryo, a reader might draw the conclusion that a woman's failure or refusal to become a mother makes her life unworthy. The author is aware of this risk, as she discloses during the same interview: “Mi sono resa subito conto [...] che era proprio per questo che correvo il rischio di vedere il mio libro strumentalizzato dai cattolici per un verso e dai non cattolici per un altro” (2009: 112).

In addition, the idea of motherhood as women's biological destiny was quite widespread in Italy at the time of the book's publication[6] and was strongly enhanced by the catholic ideology.[7] Fallaci is

6 When Fallaci first published *Lettera* in 1975, abortion in Italy was still illegal and public debate over the right of abortion was spreading. A significant part of public opinion at that time supported the idea that the embryo's life holds absolute priority over the mother's right to choose. However, the majority of the voters at the referendum were pro-choice and soon after abortion was legalised (Wood 1993; Valentini, 1997).

7 See Lucamante (2007) and Benedetti (2007) about Catholic influence on Italian women writers and in particular on Fallaci's work. On the influence of Catholic culture on women's perception and self-perception see also Accati

not immune to its influence and admits that the idea of a mother dialoguing with her unborn child is modelled on a Catholic conception of life: “Sure, so as to use a foetus as an interlocutor, I've accepted, in a literary way, the Catholic's basic concept of the human person” (quoted in Benedetti, 90). Despite its heartfelt and detailed description of the complexity of a woman's feelings towards motherhood, the book does not take a clear-cut position on the issue of women's rights.

Fallaci's stance on abortion is controversial, as is her novel. When asked if she considers pregnancy and motherhood as a trying duty for women, Fallaci replies: “Se non una fastidiosa necessità, certo una dolorosa necessità. Almeno per le donne che credono nella vita ma soffrono nel darla [...] la maternità non è un dovere ma una scelta” (2009: 103-4). These words reveal the author's ambiguity on the topic of motherhood, which is considered simultaneously as a woman's choice (“la maternità non è un dovere ma una scelta”), and as a painful social duty (“una dolorosa necessità”).

Parrella sets her investigation about motherhood and women's freedom beyond Fallaci's battlefield. While in *Lettera* the life of the protagonist becomes subordinate to the life of the baby, in *Lo Spazio Bianco* only the maternal role of the protagonist depends on the survival of the daughter, and no one is questioning the mother's right to choose between giving life or giving it up. Despite the complications during her pregnancy and her premature delivery, Maria's battle is over the tiny body of her daughter, while her own body is not at stake. Translated in its metaphorical terms, Maria is struggling to keep her newly acquired identity as a mother along with the other layers of her identity, without one role engulfing the others.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that thirty years later motherhood is perceived as less problematic by women writers. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, during the 1970s narratives on motherhood took for granted a woman's ability to have a child and for that child to be perfect. From the 1990s onwards women writers have started dealing with other difficulties related to the experience of maternity, such as infertility or the birth of a child that is not healthy, or with other complications related to reproduction.[8] Under the influence of debates occurring in contemporary Italian society, other issues related to maternity and women's bodies, such as surrogacy, non-biological motherhood, fertility and fecundation, have also come under investigation in theoretical studies.[9] This shift is reflected in the two texts under investigation. While Fallaci represents a woman's struggle to have a life and an identity outside and beyond the maternal role, considered as

(2006) and Murgia (2011). In Chapter 5 I discuss more broadly Murgia's essay on how women are represented in catholic culture.

8 Eleonora Mazzoni makes her debut as a writer with a novel that tackles the theme of female infertility and the frustrated desire of motherhood: *Le Difettose*, (Defective women, 2012). Clara Sereni discloses her experience as the mother of a disabled child in *Passami il Sale* (Pass the Salt, 2003).

9 Some of these issues are discussed in Diotima *L'Ombra della Madre*, (2007).

a prison, Parrella explores other complications arising from the experience of motherhood.

The parallelism between the protagonists can be extended to other characters of the two novels. In fact, as the mothers have several features in common, so do the two biological fathers, who have no interest in parenthood and consider the unplanned pregnancy as an embarrassing or irrelevant accident of life. However, after his initial attempts to convince his partner to opt for an abortion, the father of *Lettera* takes on a traditional role and displays a behaviour permeated by a patriarchal system of values. He claims his rights over the unborn baby, advocating the primacy of the embryo over the woman's life. For this reason, he feels entitled to keep her company and assist her, regardless of her feelings. Furthermore, he starts fantasising about having a male child, which he considers a sign of superiority compared to having a daughter (48-9). When some complications of the pregnancy occur, the doctors suggest that the woman should quit her job and stay in bed. Upon her refusal, the father of the baby blames the mother for being selfish, in that he considers the female body merely a container for his child. In *Lo Spazio Bianco* the biological father is an absent and irrelevant figure: “Era un uomo elegante che mi era passato nella vita recitando frasi molto belle. E la bellezza si era poi rivelata essere l'unico valore che avevano” (16). He is represented as an attractive but unreliable man, whose words are flattering and elegant, but have no substance, as Maria ironically remarks (“la bellezza era poi rivelata essere l'unico valore che avevano”). However, his occasional presence has no influence on Maria's and Irene's life.

Like the fathers, other secondary characters, too, have a similar function in the two novels. Their marginal presence indirectly underlines the two protagonists' condition of autonomy and solitude. However, there is a significant difference. The beginning of motherhood in *Lettera* coincides with the end of the protagonist's previous life as an independent woman. Those who show their solidarity to her, such as the female doctor, her girlfriend and her parents, make her feel less isolated, but also highlight the woman's growing weakness and powerlessness. The more she has company and eases her solitude, the more dependent she becomes. Maria is as strong, independent and self aware as the nameless protagonist of Fallaci's text was at the beginning of her mishap. However, Maria's experience has a different outcome in terms of independence and isolation. Her occasional partner does not try to objectify her body, her pregnancy does not jeopardize her life, even though it turns it upside down. Furthermore, she has the unfailing support of a few female and male acquaintances, of the doctors in the hospital, of the institutions. Above all, she is not forced to choose between herself and her baby. She can keep her job and look after Irene at the same time. Despite her limited but important network of relationships, Maria still appears much more isolated than the protagonist of *Lettera*. However, despite her relative solitude (or maybe by virtue of it), in the end she is much more independent than Fallaci's heroine, as we can see on several occasions: at work, in the

hospital, with her friends, in her sexual behaviour, in her relationship with any kind of hierarchy.

The most interesting element of the plot that appears in both novels is the baby: an unborn baby in the case of Fallaci, a half-born baby in Parrella's novel. Neither of them can speak or interact with their mothers. However, in the last part of Fallaci's novel, the embryo is given voice. His mother dreams of him as an adult, acting as a member of the jury during a trial against her. Regardless of the fact that he is already dead, the unborn child becomes an interlocutor and speaks to his mother. Conversely, all we perceive of Irene, Maria's premature daughter, is her silent presence through her mother's account, which highlights the fragility of her tiny little body, “così minuscola che nell'incubatrice avevano dovuto avvolgerla tra i cuscini” (16).

Far from Maria's description of Irene, the representation of the unborn child in Fallaci's novel points out his strength and his dominating presence, so that his mother perceives him as a threat and speaks to him with no hint of tenderness:

> L'unica cosa che ci unisce, mio caro, è un cordone ombelicale. E non siamo una coppia. Siamo un persecutore e un perseguitato. Tu al posto del persecutore, io al posto del perseguitato [...] Ti insinuasti dentro di me come un ladro, e mi rapinasti il ventre, il sangue, il respiro. Ora vorresti rapinarmi l'esistenza intera. Non te lo permetterò (57).

In *Lettera* the mother considers the child as a persecutor, devouring her from inside (“Ti insinuasti dentro di me come un ladro, e mi rapinasti il ventre, il sangue, il respiro”) and feels the need to protect herself. Despite its relative size and its presumed dependence on the mother's body, the unborn baby is seen as an arrogant entity threatening to steal the mother's entire existence. In the following exasperated words, the mother portrays him almost as a tyrant: “Se riuscirai a nascere nascerai. Se non ci riuscirai morirai. Io non ti ammazzo, sia chiaro: semplicemente, mi rifiuto di aiutarti ad esercitare fino in fondo la tua tirannia” (58). Nothing could be more distant from Maria's protective attitude towards the harmless and fragile Irene, who is a real presence in her mother's daily life, not just a dream, and whose frailty and weakness only elicit tenderness from her mother: “La sua mano, tutta, non arrivava a coprire la più piccola delle mie falangi”(25). The idea of motherhood as a sacrifice, as a painful duty on behalf of the mother, permeates the whole of Fallaci's novel. On the contrary, Parrella provides a more positive, although by no means simplistic idea of motherhood. In spite of all the difficulties she has been through, Maria experiences motherhood as a potential source of joy and happiness. This is something Maria realises gradually, as her bond with Irene becomes stronger:

> Un pomeriggio, in cui la poppata stava andando piuttosto liscia, persi di vista i monitor

> […] e guardai Irene. Aveva gli occhi aperti […] e guardava me. Forse sentiva solo il mio battito, acceleratissimo, che rincorreva il suo […] Ma mi sentiva. Stava nel mio braccio, la tenevo, mi sentiva e io le sorrisi […] Proprio un sorriso, di quando, in un momento, nella vita, sbuca una cosa inaspettata e piena e tua (95).

Here mother and daughter are communicating for the first time and the narrating voice highlights the totally unexpected pleasure and happiness generated by this discovery. As a mother, Maria counters the recurring representation of mothers who feel "threat[ened] of loss of self as soon as the meet their [daughters'] eyes" (Giorgio, 2002: 149). Both Parrella's and Fallaci's depictions of motherhood offer a parallel to the images of motherhood, pregnancy and childbirth described by Sapienza. As I have examined in Chapter 2, Modesta, who rejects the idea of self-sacrificial motherhood, perceives childbirth as a threaten to her physical survival and existence. Written at the same time as *Lettera*, *L'Arte della Gioia* reflects the cumbersome idea of motherhood as self-annihilation, but then overturns that image by representing a mother who is a good mother precisely because she refuses to put up with that logic. Fallaci's and Sapienza's protagonists are struggling with the same gloomy idea of motherhood, which they interpret in two opposite ways. Parrella, instead, engages with a positive depiction of maternity. In doing so, she reveals a "legame di pensiero" with both the older writers, although of a very different kind. While she rewrites the work of Fallaci, Parrella aligns herself with Sapienza in challenging the traditional representation of motherhood, and takes the discourse even further.

While so far I have compared the two novels in order to determine their similarities, now I focus on the differences. The comparison of Fallaci's and Parrella's depictions of motherhood and mother-child relationship highlights a remarkable difference between the two texts. In *Lettera* the child is an interlocutor from the beginning. Gradually his role gains a wider space until it develops into a character, speaking with his own voice in the imaginary trial against his mother. The unborn baby is mentioned even in the title, while the mother is not. Significantly, his death causes his mother's death. In this narration, the child assumes an overpowering centrality at the expense of his mother. This is mirrored at the level of the narrative structure, where the mother has to give up part of her subjectivity in order to allow the child to speak. In *Lo Spazio Bianco*, instead, the only speaking position is occupied by the mother, who is talking about her baby, rather than to her. In the mother-child relationship formed by Maria and Irene, the different balance depends directly on the recognition of the mother's rights as an individual.

The cumbersome presence of the embryo in *Lettera*, compared with the silent figure of Irene in *Lo Spazio Bianco*, sheds light on a significant social evolution that has occurred between the two

texts. While both authors give subjectivity to the mother, Fallaci cannot help including the embryo's point of view as an implicit admission of the limits imposed by society and culture on women's lives once their reproductive function is triggered. In *Lo Spazio Bianco* the perspective adopted is exclusively that of the mother and maternal subjectivity is uncontested. No space is allowed to the child's point of view. The dialectical exchange between the mother and the unborn child characterising the older text here is replaced by an interior dialogue between a mother and an adult daughter who are the same person. Instead of focusing on the conflict between freedom of choice and motherhood, Parrella concentrates on the possibility of combining the maternal and the filial points of view, without having the maternal role absorb all other facets of the woman's identity, or the filial subjectivity overshadow the maternal. Ironically, at the end of the novel the protagonist of *Lettera* is closer to Maria's mother than to Maria, in spite of her emancipation and independence. In fact, she become a victim, although unwittingly, of a male-dominated system.

Moreover, in *Lettera* the child is referred to as male, while in *Lo Spazio Bianco* the protagonist gives birth to a daughter. Even though the speaking voice of *Lettera* does not know the baby's sex, nevertheless all the pronouns, nouns, adjectives and other grammatical terms referring to the unborn child are in the masculine form: *bambino*, *nato*, *figlio*, *lui*, and so on. It is true that in Italian the masculine is the all-inclusive grammatical gender, having replaced the functions carried by the neuter in Latin. However it is noticeable that the mother shows no hesitation about the use of the masculine, as if she never considers that the embryo might be a girl. Even in the dream of the trial, when the child is imagined as an adult (83), the terms referring to him are always masculine. The fact that a few pages earlier the author seems fully conscious of the asymmetric use of gender in the Italian language (73) reinforces the idea that the use of the masculine for the child is not neutral. In *Lettera* the unborn child is definitely a son. The privileged position of the mother-son dyad that, as I discuss in Chapter 1, characterises Western culture and even more Italian culture, emerges uncontested in *Lettera*. The preference for the son implies a widespread, deep-rooted devaluation of women in a society that relegates women, and namely mothers, to the condition of passive objects. Fallaci perceives this devaluation, but does not defy it.

The author herself implicitly confirms this interpretation when she states that being a woman implies unavoidable suffering: “La condizione femminile è sofferenza senza scampo [...] Lo è dai tempi remoti in cui si formò questa società dove quasi ogni diritto spetta agli uomini e quasi ogni dovere alle donne” (2009: 102). Fallaci is acutely aware of the imbalance between the sexes, yet she is unable to redress this unfair situation through the voice of her protagonist. In fact, if on the one hand the protagonist of *Lettera* finds her partner's preference for a son deplorable (54), on the other hand she is unable to display a different attitude.

The different sex of the child is an important part of the inter-textual corrective relationship that is occurring between these two women writers. The reason for this difference might be that, since the unborn child in *Lettera* is a threatening presence and represents almost an enemy in his mother life, it is naturally perceived to be male. This is consistent with the fact that all men in the novel obdurately oppose the woman's choice, so that the novel betrays its grounding in a male-dominated society hostile to women. On the contrary, *Lo Spazio Bianco* depicts a mother who locates herself in a space that is not male-centred, and in which being a woman is not a disadvantage. Therefore, it is no surprise that Maria has a daughter.

However, my suggestion is that there is a more complex explanation than this. By turning the gender-undetermined or male child into a daughter, Parrella accomplishes a metamorphosis that has an extreme relevance to Italian literature in relation to the literary mother-child representation. The detail concerning the sex of the baby is not secondary in a literary tradition that offers many examples of the relationship between mother and son, but allows little or no space for the mother-daughter dyad, as evidenced in Chapter 1.

Similarly, Muraro blames our culture for the preference given to the love between mother and son: " [Nel]la nostra civiltà […] la preferenza materna per il figlio maschio [...] non è un'ingiustizia materna, ma una caratteristica della nostra cultura" (1992: 12). Muraro is not referring exclusively to Italian culture. In the history of Western culture the mother-daughter relationship, which appeared early in the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, is soon replaced by a multitude of mother-son relationships, the most powerful of which is, in symbolic terms, the relationship between Mary and Jesus as iconised by the Catholic tradition.[10] Fallaci does not escape this cultural pressure. A residue of this cultural bias against the mother-daughter relationship can also be recognised in Sapienza and Scego. In *L'Arte della Gioia* Modesta has to kill her patriarchal mothers before reforging a non-patriarchal maternal-filial bond with other women who are not biologically related to her. In *Oltre Babilonia* Scego recovers the biological dimension within the mother-daughter bond. However, her mothers and daughters, too, have to undergo a painful process of deconstruction before reconstructing their relationship on a different basis, outside a patriarchal frame of reference. Furthermore, the reconstruction is not fully accomplished, but jonly begun, thanks to the narration.

By replacing the unborn male child with a daughter, therefore, Parrella has accomplished a complex cultural and literary operation. On the one hand she has aligned herself with the most recent tradition of women writers who give prominence to the mother-daughter relationship. On the

10 Giorgio, (2002), Accati (2006), Cavarero, (2007), Murgia (2011), Sambuco (2012). This aspect is widely analysed in Chapter 1.

other hand, she develops a legacy of thought with another woman writer, Fallaci, whose canonical text she reinterprets. If we analyse the relationship between the two texts under the lens of literary entrustment, it can be argued that Parrella has reread and rewritten a chosen female authored text, insofar as literary entrustment "helps to construct the relationship between the novels of women writers and the texts they have inherited" (Lucamante: 241). Furthermore, by virtue of this unspoken (and unacknowledged) dialogue with a literary mother, Parrella becomes part of what Ida Dominijanni calls a female genealogy.

As Dominijanni explains (2002), tradition and genealogy are somehow opposite. In the mechanism of tradition the younger generation is expected to have a receptive, passive attitude.[11] Dominijanni uses the term "genealogia" to place emphasis on the freedom of the younger generation to interrogate and re-interpret what they have received, allowing them to play an active role in the process of transmission:

> La genealogia [...] comporta un movimento ascendente, in cui chi viene dopo interroga chi è venuto prima a partire da sé, lo/la reinterpreta sulla base delle proprie domande, gli/le fornisce autorità in un rapporto di libertà; e in questo caso è il presente che riscrive il passato [...] (191).

The concept of genealogy has a liberating effect on younger authors who embrace it. Unlike tradition, which gives prominence to the predecessor and to his/her authority through a chain of transmission that moves downwards, genealogy creates an upward movement. In this case the transmission privileges the perspective of the new generation, who are free to interpret and rewrite the past in a way that respects both the authority of the earlier authors and the right of the younger writers to move beyond it.

Parrella's way of dealing with Fallaci's text clearly follows the pattern of genealogy. The younger author takes on the challenge undertaken by the elder author and produces a text based on the same elements of the plot as those of her predecessor, modifying what is necessary in order to suit a new social context. The corrective aspect of this rewriting is not aimed at a competition between the two writers, but rather at producing an up-to-date portrayal of women's conditions within contemporary Italian society. The re-reading of the older text, accompanied by a respectful attitude toward the literary mother, provides the younger author with "a new epistemological system in which [her] work can be inserted" (Lucamante: 106).

11 "La tradizione comporta un movimento discendente, dalle premesse alle conseguenze, dai prodromi agli epigoni, impegna chi è venuto prima a tramandare un contenuto, quando non un canone o peggio un'ortodossia, a chi viene dopo, e chi viene dopo a recepirlo, mantenerlo, tramandarlo a sua volta facendosene tramite obbediente" (Dominijanni, 2002: 191).

The reconceptualisation of Fallaci's novel provided by *Lo Spazio Bianco* is a significant example of how female inter-textuality follows a pattern of literary *matérnage*. To a lesser degree, in much of Parrella's literary production it is possible to retrace that "legame di pensiero" that connects her to a genealogy of Italian women writers by virtue of her thematic choices and of the clearly gendered perspective she adopts.

While it may be too reductive to identify inherently "female" themes in literature (Lucamante, 185), some topics (such as the relationship between freedom of choice and motherhood, or the mother-daughter relationship and so on) are so recurrent in contemporary Italian women's writings that scholars have begun to theorise the existence of "uno stile dell'enunciazione femminile" (Fortini, 2012: 124).[12] Parrella is no exception, having already dealt with these topics in earlier works. For instance, in *L'Amico Immaginario,* one of the short stories included in *Per Grazia Ricevuta*, the female protagonist, Marina, an emancipated young woman, proves herself fully aware of the potential of motherhood and of her freedom of choice. She falls pregnant to her husband but, since she is in love with another man, she opts for an abortion, refusing to carry the unwanted child of a man she no longer loves. The perspective adopted in this short story links Parrella to another important woman writer, in that *L'Amico Immaginario* reflects Dacia Maraini's definition of abortion as a woman's decision to give or give up a life over which she has absolute power. In one of her early works, *Donna in Guerra* (1975) Maraini portrays a woman who decides to have an abortion after falling pregnant to her husband, both because she no longer loves him, and because he made her pregnant against her will. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, several other works authored by Maraini, such as the novel *Il Treno per Helsinki* (1984) and the essay *Un Clandestino a Bordo* (1996), tackle the theme of a woman's right to the freedom of choice in relation reproductive choices. Maraini's relentless attention to themes such as female sexuality and women's oppression in a male-defined system makes her an important point of reference, that is, a literary mother, for many younger writers, including Parrella.

From her early career Parrella seems to belong to a genealogy of female authors who give prominence to the depiction of women's struggle for freedom, fulfilment and happiness in the context of Italian society, which is particularly conservative with regard to reproduction, female sexuality and family. From within this genealogy Parrella criticises and then reconstructs Fallaci's work, conversing with a text that has much in common with her own, while incorporating into her predecessor's world new elements arising from the social and cultural context to which she belongs. Fallaci's nameless protagonist desperately tries to adjust maternity to her life and is defeated. She

12 Laura Fortini and Paola Bono discuss this aspect in their coedited volume *Il Romanzo del Divenire. Un Bildungsroman delle donne?* (2007).

wants motherhood redesigned in different terms and her death is a symbolic sign of her failure. Similarly, Maraini depicts women who fail to adjust motherhood to their own life. Three decades later, *Lo Spazio Bianco* focuses on how motherhood can find its place in a woman's life and explores the conditions by which women can enjoy their freedom.

3. The "white space" as a gender marker: a controversial notion of women's freedom

Looking at her mother's experience, the young Maria draws the conclusion that marriage for a woman is a synonym of dependence and lack of autonomy. Therefore, Maria chooses her independence above everything else, ready to accept all its consequences, including solitude, which, in the end, is not necessarily an unpleasant condition. The *spazio bianco*, here, assumes an additional meaning. In this case, the white space after which the novel is named works as a gender marker, since the protagonist locates herself and her unconventional experience of motherhood in a space that is at the same time de-patriarchalised and characterised by a remarkable degree of solitude.

Coming from a working-class family, Maria has struggled in order to conquer her status as an independent woman, thanks to her education as a means of social ascent. Only her hard work has allowed her to achieve this social leap: "Crescere figlia di operaio negli anni Settanta, e poi proprio per questo studiare, intestardirsi sui libri, diventare la generazione dello scarto intellettuale, erano cose che davano una certa arroganza" (57). Maria is proudly aware of the identity and of the status she has conquered:

> Avevo le unghie in ordine, e un libro nella borsa, e un conto corrente che registrava ogni mese un accredito del ministero. Avevo visto tutti i film d'essay all'Abadir [...] Avrei portato Irene a tutti i cortei, appesa nel marsupio (10).

In this quick portrait of herself she enumerates the most relevant features characterising her sense of self (her look, her culture, her social status, her economical independence, her intellectual commitment) while prefiguring her relationship with Irene.

When she falls pregnant she is alone in this new experience. Her parents had died a long time ago, she has no siblings or close relatives and her occasional partner has shown no interest in having a baby, nor is he worthy of being involved. As Maria admits to herself without regrets: "Non era stato un grande amore, era solo stato distratto" (16). These words emphasise the superficiality of Maria's attachment to Irene's biological father and his irrelevance in her life, apart from the

unplanned conception due to his lack of attention (“era solo stato distratto”). All she recalls from their relationship is the loneliness affecting them both: “Tutto quello che avevamo costruito insieme, era stato uno specchio che rifletteva le nostre solitudini” (16). He has no name, he is not even a presence in the novel, a circumstance which enhances Maria's independence as well as her solitude.

The irrelevance of the paternal figure in *Lo Spazio Bianco* is in line with the representation of fathers found in *L'Arte della Gioia* and *Oltre Babilonia*. However, a progression can be traced from Sapienza to Parrella: Modesta's father embodies the worst aspects of patriarchy. He openly despises women and does not care about his family. He is a violent man with both his wife and children and repeatedly a rapist. Modesta's mother is helpless and cannot even protect her daughter from his violence. Having experienced such a father, Modesta consciously chooses a weak and inessential figure as a father of her children. In *Oltre Babilonia* the common father has voluntarily resigned from his parental role. Therefore, mothers and daughters have to deal with this absence that is not a planned decision on behalf of the mothers, but rather a consequence of fate. Especially in the case of Maryam and Zuhra, the disappearance of the father has serious repercussions on both the mother's and the daughter's lives. In *Lo Spazio Bianco,* instead, the absence of the father is consequential to the protagonist's decision to be independent and not to let a man rule her life. Here the father is rejected, his role is denied by the mother, who consciously takes on full parental responsibility. Irene's condition of being a fatherless daughter, therefore, depends on Maria's choice and not on fate or on a negotiation with social rules, as in the case of Modesta's children. Having dismissed the patriarchal notion of parenthood embodied by her parents, as a non-patriarchal mother Maria has determined to stand alone.

Unlike her mother, who was completely and willingly dependent on her husband, Maria does not consider the lack of a partner as a problem. Even when Maria's idea of maternity undergoes an unexpected twist due to Irene's premature birth, she remains consistent with her previous choices and prefers to face the anxiety of the long wait on her own rather than sharing the burden with a reluctant and unnecessary partner. Although her attitude may appear a self-defence against social rejection, and it sounds indeed very lonely, it is not an attempt to justify to herself the lack of a partner. There is a more complex explanation for her intended isolation.

The origin of what can be seen as Maria's weakness is also the source of her strength. In fact, her independence is granted by her solitude. The person who is closest to her is an old friend and colleague, Fabrizio, who is able to provide comfort and support, without invading Maria's private space. This voluntary exile from any kind of familial connection and its unwanted influence is simultaneously the place where Maria's freedom is grounded and the price she has to pay for her

freedom. In her self-portrayal the protagonist insists on this twofold characteristic, her self-imposed solitude and her fierce independence, which appear as two features that cannot be separated: “Io al cinema a quattromilalire, io a letto con chi volevo, io chiusa per ore in biblioteca [...] Io con la sigaretta in mano pronta a smettere quando avessi voluto” (16). In her own words, and reinforced by the anaphoric repetition of the subject pronoun (“Io... io... io...”), Maria proudly emphasises that she is in control of her life and body, since achieving a condition of self-sufficiency.

The comparison with the other women portrayed in the novel, especially the other mothers in the neonatal unit, sheds light on Maria's determination to be alone. These women, who are so similar to Maria's mother, have huge, encumbering connections and families, a condition which excludes loneliness and freedom in equal measure. Some of them are hopelessly subject to male power, as in the case of Simona, the Jehovah witness who needs Maria's help to save her child's life from a narrow-minded husband. Some others are meek and resigned in front of male violence, as in the case of the drug-addicted woman who gets stabbed by her partner in the hospital after giving birth to her child and refuses to report him to the police. Despite her solitude, or rather by virtue of it, Maria is much stronger and more independent than any other woman in the novel. Unlike them, Maria does not accept the contingencies with passive resignation. She fights and encourages her peers to do the same. To the other women's surprise, she talks to the doctors on equal terms, by no means intimidated when facing authority of any kind. For instance, Maria is ready to call the police when the nurses make a mistake that could be fatal to Irene, forcing the head physician to adopt a more responsible behavior (83-4). As one of the other mothers says, when she asks for Maria's help and advice: “Perché tu rispondi ai dottori e non ti metti paura che dopo ti ammazzano il bambino” (83). A contributing factor in the difference in attitude towards (male) authority is that Maria has a different level of education compared to the other women, including her mother. In fact, she remarks quite often on the importance of education, of her “intestardirsi sui libri” (57), in determining who she is now as an adult woman. From her adolescence, Maria firmly believed that “avrei studiato quello che volevo, e che quello che avessi studiato sarei diventata” (15).

If having a partner means to be like those other women, it is clear why Maria has consciously chosen her condition of voluntary exile from a traditional family:

> Niente mi ha dato sicurezza nella vita come il maniglione di ferro che serra da cento anni la porta d'ingresso, niente è stato *più completo e libero della mia solitudine* nella mia casa (33 *emphasis mine*).

In the novel, freedom and solitude are strictly related and perceived under a positive light, since,

in the protagonist's opinion, this combination creates an acceptable compromise for a woman who wants to escape patriarchal, societal and cultural conditionings. Several passages of the novel show how Maria's deliberated independence and solitude are cause and consequence of each other, as two indissoluble sides of the same condition. For instance, during Irene's stay in the neonatal unit Maria has an affair with one of the doctors, who is much younger than her. Even though she likes him, Maria is very keen on keeping this relationship a casual one, not allowing him to stay overnight at her place. In this way she reaffirms her control over her life, and, simultaneously, her solitude.

Freedom and solitude are also necessary conditions for Maria to become subject of desire. As the comparison with other women shows clearly, Maria is the only one able to express and fulfill her desires, including sexual desires. Like Modesta in *L'Arte della Gioia*, Maria does not allow the role of mother to cancel her identity and her needs as a woman. Borrowing Irigaray's words, Maria "refuse[s] to let her desire be annihilated by the law of the father" and claims her right "to pleasure, to *jouissance*, to passion" (1991: 42).

The perfect combination of freedom and solitude Maria has enjoyed in her adulthood is suddenly jeopardised when she enters the unexplored land of motherhood. Despite all her efforts, something has slipped out of her hands. Maria realises that, even if she can control her body and her reproductive potential, she cannot determine the conditions of mothering. Hence Maria feels abandoned by her 'head', which used to be the strongest element of her identity and self-perception:

> Ho provato. Aspettando la metropolitana per l'ospedale, tutti i giorni ho provato a leggere saggistica. I primi tempi ci sono riuscita, perché non avevo altro se non la mia testa. Ed era una testa molto esercitata sui libri [...] La testa si era esercitata così, a fidarsi solo di se stessa. E allora ritornava nell'equivoco di bastarsi da sola […] All'inizio ha funzionato [...] Invece avevo perso anche quella (8).

In order to face the anguish and fears haunting her mind, Maria initially turns to what has shaped and given sense to her previous life: her books, her culture, her intellectual curiosity. Soon, she has to admit that her head, "la testa", as a metaphor of her identity as an intellectual, is not enough in this new circumstance. If Maria is able to choose to have a child without having a partner and regardless of social conditioning, her prematurely born child represents the risk implicit in the human condition. However, her identity, her education, her personal history and her proud sense of self provide Maria with the necessary strength to face this unforeseen event. As a young woman Maria did not rely on the model provided by her biological mother, but on what she had chosen to become. Consistently, as a mature adult, Maria's culture and emancipation are her only guide

through motherhood.

Due to her clear-cut rejection of the model offered by her family, Maria's relationship to her parents seems more balanced than that of other fictional daughters. The dysfunctionality of the mother-daughter relationship, in narratives as well as in theoretical studies, is generally counterbalanced by the daughter's attachment to the father as an alternative to the maternal. Theorists such as Irigaray (1991), Kristeva (1986), Muraro (1992), Cavarero (1990, 2007) and others have discussed the pitfalls of the daughter's identification with the father, which has been widely represented in Literature too. From Aeschylus to Sibilla Aleramo, from Anna Banti to Simone de Beauvoir, Western literature is fraught with daughters hopelessly attached to, and identified with, their fathers. Like the other novels investigated in this thesis, *Lo Spazio Bianco* differs profoundly from this pattern.

As Italian philosopher Diana Sartori maintains "non è solo il padre patriarcale ad essere morto, con lui è morta anche la madre patriarcale" (2007: 55). This statement works perfectly to describe Maria's situation, implying that, as a daughter, she has accomplished her emancipation from a dysfunctional, crippling family model and has eradicated herself from an invalidating maternal legacy. Maria rejects both her parents' behaviour for their submission to an unfair order, while claiming proudly her own emancipation from this same system. However, according to Italian feminist theorists (Diotima 2007), the death of the patriarchal family, far from freeing the daughter from its stifling conditioning, has generated a backlash, producing what they call a "maternal ghost" (Giorgio, 2002). As discussed in Chapter 1, several Italian women writers engage with the difficulties arising from the maternal ghost and deal with the daughter's relationship with the (dead) mother as an unsolved dilemma. Written at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this novel portrays a woman who seems to have experienced the extinction both of the patriarchal family and of its ghosts.

If in Italian theorists' most recent elaborations the maternal ghost is still haunting women's lives and their ability to relate to each other[13], this does not happen in the case Parrella constructs. Maria is able to show solidarity and warmth to other women, from whom, however, she generally prefers to keep her distance. She has freely chosen a path of solitude, which has protected her against patriarchal conditionings, from a male unwanted presence and from others in general. For instance, during the long wait Maria decides to reduce the number of phone calls from and to friends: "Così si rarefacevano gli amici, non per stanchezza o presunzione di farcela da sola, ma perché mi pareva, a guardare gli altri, di vedere il mio dolore sfocato in una sofferenza imprecisa" (45). Unable to cope with the others' reaction to her sorrow, Maria chooses to be alone once again, showing no

13 This aspect is debated in Diotima, *L'Ombra della Madre*, (Napoli: Liguori, 2007).

regret.

But to what extent is her choice really free? And why does she need to be on her own to be free? Sometimes Maria seems to have second thoughts about her solitude and compares her mother's choice to hers, wondering whose decision has been harder: “Mi chiedevo chi di noi due avesse rinunciato di più” (89). What is it that Parrella is trying to tell us? Is she suggesting that a woman in contemporary Italian society can be free only at the price of being alone, without a partner and a family? Does the author imply that the only way a woman can be free is when she renounces a relational life and accepts solitude, since relationships of any kind still present a limit to women's freedom? At first sight, *Lo Spazio Bianco* seems to propose only these two possibilities. On the one hand, there are women who are subordinate to male power and who, by accepting this subjection, can enjoy company and support. On the other hand, there are women who are independent and self-sufficient, like Maria, and therefore, by necessity, alone.[14] Apparently, for a woman there is not a third option in the society that Parrella portrays. As Sartori[15] suggests, the end of patriarchy does not immediately entail a new order:

> Con la venuta meno del patriarcato viene meno anche il suo ordine, ma il risultato non è immediatamente un nuovo ordine, quanto piuttosto un aumento di disordine, e il ritorno di forme di regolazione, concettualizzazione, azione più arcaiche, sempre più spesso elementari e violente (2007: 49).

While hypothesising the end of a patriarchal order, Diotima theorists single out the lack of an alternative system of values. *Lo Spazio Bianco* provides a fictional rendition of this emptiness. Outside a patriarchal family and a male-dominated society, what is left for an emancipated woman is a *spazio bianco*, a white space of freedom, which on several occasions, resembles an empty space. Since the kind of freedom Maria has gained is debatable, it can be said that her decision to choose solitude has offered some form of liberation which resembles what Danielle Hipkins defines as “another set of walls” (2007: 6). Compared to Maria's mother, or to the other female characters in the novel, who inhabit a male-dominated space from which they are unable to escape, Maria's position is different. While the other women are locked in, Maria seems locked out. The invisible

14 This interpretation of the *spazio bianco* as a metaphorical representation of Italian women's condition, suspended between old social patterns and new possibilities to be explored, characterises both the novel and the film inspired by the novel. Alberto Crespi, one of the reviewers of *Lo Spazio Bianco* at the Venice film Festival wrote: “È legittimo leggere *Lo spazio bianco* come un’allegoria delle donne nell’Italia di oggi: donne in attesa - di rispetto, identità, ruolo sociale - ma capaci di lottare, di tramandare solidarietà e cultura (non è un caso che Maria sia un’insegnante).” A.Crespi, “Lo Spazio Bianco”, published in *L'Unità* (9/9/2009), http://cerca.unita.it/ARCHIVE/xml/310000/305313.xml key=Alberto+Crespi+Lo+spazio+bianco&first=1&orderby= (accessed June 16, 2012)

15 About this issue, see also Chiara Zamboni in the same volume (2007).

"walls" protecting Maria's white space of freedom are the emblem of (self) exclusion, rather than seclusion. Consistently with this gloomy perspective, Maria's choice, although conscious, is not exempt from a certain degree of resignation and disillusionment:

> Avevo potuto diventare femminista [...] avevo marciato a mio modo attraverso gli uomini, per non perdermi niente. *Ma sentivo che l'errore c'era comunque*: a sposarsi e a restare soli, a fidanzarsi e ad amare, a innamorarsi e a sostenersi [...] a proteggere e a farsi proteggere. E io non sarei mai stata pronta a difendere nessuna di queste cose (89 *emphasis mine*).

Maria's pessimistic vision deserves closer examination. Located in this white space of a de-patriarchalised society, her choice is socially unconventional without being revolutionary. Rather than defying social constraints, Maria avoids them. While on the one hand Parrella's novel is breaking the mould of what Butler (2004) defines a recognisable family paradigm, on the other hand the author does not go as further as to design a different form of family aggregation.

When Butler discusses variations on kinship that depart from normative heterosexual family she has in mind same sex couples. Maria is not homosexual, but, in terms of social recognition, the family she forms with Irene differs from the hegemonic pattern, so that her anomalous choice locates her and Irene outside of the "dyadic heterosexually based family forms secured through the marriage vow" (2004: 104). Although this situation does not prevent her from having a "liveable life" (2004: 1), it certainly affects her to a certain extent. In fact, the only alternative to the patriarchal family Maria can carve out for herself and Irene is a condition of voluntary exile, which is pervaded by a slight sense of defeat.[16] Despite declaring herself a feminist, although she proudly considers herself to be an unconventional woman, the protagonist admits that "l'errore c'era comunque". Through Maria's voice, Parrella articulates a critique of the traditional notion of family, but does not dare to suggest a different paradigm, apart from the isolated mother-daughter dyad Maria is about to form with Irene. Unlike *L'Arte della Gioia*, which redesigns the notions of family and kinship by providing an alternative - although utopian- pattern to the patriarchal family, *Lo Spazio Bianco* does not go so far.

The perception of Maria's anomalous position within society is enhanced by her daily experience. In spite of the fact that the society depicted in *Lo Spazio Bianco* is not overtly

16 In the film *Lo Spazio Bianco*, director Francesca Comencini enhanced this interpretation of Maria's solitude as a choice which is at the same time voluntary and unavoidable. Taking the clue from the novel, Comencini adds some details that are not in the narrative text, but are consistent with my interpretation of it. In one of the initial scenes, the protagonist is portrayed while she dances alone, which is a visual translation of her condition of solitude (cfr. Luciano and Scarparo, in *Reframing Italy: New Trends in Italian Women's Filmmaking*, Purdue University Press, 2013)

threatening to the woman who chooses to be a single mother, Maria has to face a certain degree of hostility from social conventions and from institutions. When she goes to the registry office to register Irene's birth, she finds out that Irene is called “illegittima”, having no father and being given her mother's surname. Even though the illegitimate condition does not substantially affect a child's rights in contemporary Italy, the term “illegittima” highlights the stigma of this mother's choice in terms of social recognition. In fact, in the patriarchal context of Italian society, bearing the maternal surname can only be due to the absence of the father, as in Irene's case.[17] A similar situation occurs in *Oltre Babilonia*, where both daughters carry, for different reasons, the maternal surname and have no other siblings or close relatives to break the dyad. However, in Scego's novel the two mother-daughter pairs appear isolated only initially, soon developing an intense network of relationships between women that prefigures a new symbolic order. In Parrella's novel, instead, the isolation of the mother-daughter dyad is unmodified and accurately preserved by Maria, who equates solitude with freedom.

Sara Gandini asserts that women's freedom has determined a change in the notion of family:

> La mia posizione non ha nulla a che fare con la critica del primo femminismo che raccontava la lotta delle figlie per affermare la propria individualità rispetto a madri che non si erano ribellate all'ideologia patriarcale. Le *famiglie sono cambiat*e parecchio, grazie all*'avvento della libertà femminile*” (2007: 83 *emphasis mine*).

In her statement, Gandini gives voice to a perception which is very common among her generation of women.[18] Gandini's belief that women's freedom has entailed a change in family organisation partly tallies with Butler's idea that society can be reshaped by personal desires. In fact, both advocate for abandoning a construction of gender and society “that is obsolete at this point in human history and yet still socially validated in practice, particularly from a legal standpoint” (Lucamante, 184).

Lo Spazio Bianco reflects to some extent Gandini's position in terms of women's freedom.

17 The attribution of the surname to a child in Italy follows a procedure which, in spite of being based on habits rather than on law, is quite strict. The legal requirement is that children born to a married couple have to bear the name of the father and there is no other option available for families. Parents are not allowed to choose their children's surname, not even the maternal and paternal surnames hyphenated. If the parents are in a *de facto* relationship, evidence of the father's recognition of the child is precisely the attribution of the father's surname (in fact, in Italy *de facto* couples are not recognised as such). Therefore, if a child carries the maternal family name, it can only mean that there is no father at all. A recent conference held in September 2011 in Venice debated this issue. The most important contributions have been recently published in: *Nominare per Esistere: Nomi e Cognomi*, edited by Giuliana Giusti, (Venezia: Cafoscarina, 2011). In particular, I draw information from the chapter authored by R. Oliva, “Nel nome del Padre e della Madre. Azioni per la Trasmissione del Cognome della Madre”, 113-139.

18 The term 'new generation' here refers to the philosophers who joined the Diotima community a generation after it was founded. See Dominijanni for a detailed analysis of the attitude of the younger women, in Diotima (2002: 193).

However, Gandini's claim about the emergence of new kinds of family sounds more like a wish than a real accomplishment, at least in the literary rendition given by Parrella. Despite the fact that family as an institution has significantly evolved during the last decades, it has not yet led to a different, more open idea of society and of gendered roles. *Lo Spazio Bianco* reflects this change, insofar as the novel depicts the disaggregation of older patterns of family and social organisation. However, Parrella is reluctant to imagine new forms of family structure to replace the traditional pattern based on the heterosexual couple.

Despite not offering a new family paradigm, *Lo Spazio Bianco* offers more than a glimmer of hope. If we compare the two mother-daughter pairs in which Maria is involved, an evolution has occurred. While the older pair is conversing in order to find the reasons of their double defeat, the younger pair is looking for new relational patterns in order to avoid that bitter outcome.

By giving prominence to the mother-daughter relationship and by grounding it in a de-patriarchalised context *Lo Spazio Bianco* contributes to what Dominijanni calls "disseppellimento del rapporto figlia-madre dall'oblio della storia e dalla cancellazione dell'ordine simbolico" (2002: 191). In doing so, the novel aligns itself with the work of Italian feminist thinkers who advocate for women to create a maternal symbolic order as an alternative to the prevailing order of the father on which patriarchy is built. A different symbolic frame of reference can be achieved only through a radical change in women's attitude toward the maternal figure, from mistrust to love, and implies the necessity to re-tie the severed bond between mother and daughter. As Muraro (2006) argues, it is necessary to restore the mother-daughter bond,

> sostituendo all'avversione la gratitudine per la madre e per le altre donne che ne continuano l'opera, apre lo spazio per *la dicibilità dell'esperienza femminile*, altrimenti sottoposta all'adeguamento alla norma e al potere maschile[19] (150, *emphasis mine*).

In *Lo Spazio Bianco* this radical change is accomplished only in part. While Maria is forming a new kind of bond with her daughter, she cannot recover the relationship with her own mother, so that the maternal bond is re-tied only on one side.

While suggesting that in a male-dominated society women's independence is possible exclusively in a self-referential space of solitude, Parrella locates the mother-daughter relationship in an environment that is able to provide new spaces of freedom for women. Can this be the first step towards what Muraro calls "la dicibilità dell'esperienza femminile"?

19 This statement is part of an interview with Ida Dominijanni published on *Il Manifesto*, 28 ottobre 2005. The interview has been republished as an appendix to a revised version of *L'Ordine Simbolico della Madre* (2006).

4. The white space between a trauma and its beneficial side-effects

In *Lo Spazio Bianco* Parrella provides a multiple interpretation of the concept of space. The centrality of space is evident in the title. The white space after which the book is named is not, or not only, a physical place. It may work as a metonymy referring to the whiteness of the hospital in which most of the story is set. However, it has other and more complex figurative meanings. To begin with, the white space works as a metaphor of a suspended time in the protagonist's life, marking the transition from one phase of her life to another, before and after the experience of motherhood.[20] Then this metaphorical concept of space refers to an area, where patriarchal tenets do not govern women's lives, and in which women can ground their freedom. Strategically mentioned in the title and only once in the novel, *lo spazio bianco* also assumes a third meaning. It represents the particular emotional state that follows a trauma. *Spazio bianco* is, therefore, a metaphorical description of the major break that has occurred in Maria's life, due to her ill-fated pregnancy which, serendipitously, turns out to have benefits. In fact, Irene's premature birth is an event that, despite the initial difficulties, opens up new, unhoped-for and unexplored possibilities.

Analysed exclusively from Maria's point of view, the period defined as a white space is an interruption between two phases of her existence. After Irene's birth Maria realises a sudden change that has occurred in her perspective on life, "come *uno scarto di livello* tra tutto quello che mi era accaduto prima dell'arrivo di Irene, e una percezione nuova delle cose, che si era formata a mia insaputa" (103 *emphasis mine*). This perception marks a boundary line in Maria's life between the time before and after Irene's birth. The change is not just a different view of life, but a feeling of detachment in which the emotional hierarchy regulating her previous existence has been turned upside down. This is something that Maria acknowledges with relief: "Registrai un distacco, che non era una cosa brutta, anzi, era straordinaria: era solo che tutte le cose mi sembravano meno, ma veramente molto meno serie di prima" (103). If the change in the hierarchy of priorities is a common experience for women after birth, this is particularly true in Maria's case, and the *spazio bianco* contributes to make the "scarto di livello" more evident.

As the protagonist emphasises on many occasions, the "white space" is not only the cocoon of isolation that she has wrapped around herself. The *spazio bianco* is above all a necessary watershed dividing her life before and after becoming a mother. In this figurative interpretation of space, the white colour has a crucial meaning since the property of the colour white is that it contains within it all colours, it is a field of possibilities. This is a particularly appropriate description of Maria's experience. As the protagonist affirms: "Irene era arrivata quando nessuno se l'aspettava più" (15).

20 The title of the French translation actually highlights this aspect, since it translates 'the white space' as 'the suspended time', (*Le Temps Suspendu*).

Her pregnancy arrives late in life, as a consequence of an affair rather than being in a stable relationship. Nevertheless, the unexpected event opens up unforeseen possibilities such as the chance to experience motherhood, and therefore to challenge and overturn the maternal model handed down to her from her mother.

The transition toward motherhood is marked by this long pause, which is not only a space of indeterminacy, due to an accident of life, but results in being a purposeful interruption to mark both the fracture and then the junction between the two different conditions. The attention is not focused on the result (motherhood) or the trauma itself, but on what lies in between, which is not just an empty space, but an untouched and unexplored land of opportunities. This land cannot be described properly through recognisable categories. Therefore, the white space is the necessary metaphor through which the author emphasises the uniqueness of the event, and through which the protagonist acknowledges the interruption that has occurred in her life, and which she is as yet unable to define in words.

This last interpretation of the white space suggests a less pessimistic perspective on the relationship between freedom and solitude for a woman. We can deduce it from the last page of the book, where Maria discovers that she is not the only one who has experienced a *spazio bianco* in her life. During the final exam, in fact, Maria realises that also Gaetano, her 57 year old student, has experienced a trauma which has marked a white space in his life. Despite the harshness of the trauma, in Gaetano's case too, the white space is not a bad thing. As he writes in his final essay, referring to the industrial injury that has permanently mutilated his hand: “Alla mano destra ho sempre tre dita in meno. Che sono la mia libertà, perché la mia normalità di prima era una pietra” (112). Writing about his traumatic experience, Gaetano realises that he needs to mark the fracture that has occurred in his life due to the accident, because since then his perception of life has radically changed. After the trauma, Gaetano discovered that his previous normality was severely limiting. Therefore, he now needs to articulate the difference between the two phases of his existence and is looking for different narrative tools which enable him to express it adequately: “Io devo scrivere altre due pagine, al presente, che è un presente nuovo” (112). What Gaetano wants to say is that the physical mutilation has made him unfit for his previous work and, therefore, has forced him to go back to school, in order to get the necessary qualification to find another job. This unwanted circumstance entails an unexpected opportunity for him. Despite the initial difficulties, Gaetano discovers that he loves learning and enjoyes his new status. The traumatic event has created for Gaetano the conditions to receive an education, a chance that he was denied during his childhood, and a loss that he deeply regretted.

Maria understands Gaetano's feelings, as her suggestion shows: “Mettici uno *spazio bianco* e

ricomincia a scrivere quello che vuoi" (112). She has recognised in her student's experience the same kind of unforeseen event that has occurred in her life, that is, a beneficial trauma which, against all odds, provides unhoped-for changes in life. The *spazio bianco* is, therefore, a multiple literary device. It allows Maria an emotional space to forge her new identity as a mother, far from stereotypes, societal conditionings and family pressures, and to revise her experience as a daughter. The *spazio bianco,* therefore, can be seen as a way to define women's position in language, culture and society, and hopefully the place where women's unspeakable condition can finally be challenged in order to accomplish "la dicibilità dell'esperienza femminile."

The association of the colour white with motherhood and femininity, along with its positive connotation, is not new in feminist theory. Hélène Cixous famously said that a woman "writes in white ink", referring to the fact that "there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk" (1976: 891). What is different in Parrella's novel is that it broadens the metaphor of the colour white beyond the notion of motherhood so as to include the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship within it. While maternal discourse "is intimately tied to and tied up in social and political realities, as well as to biological and psychological structures" (Hirsch 196), or, in other words, grounded in a specific context, Parrella decides to carve out a special space for her mother-daughter dyad, to which arguably the *spazio bianco* mentioned in the tile refers. In this *spazio bianco,* seen as an extraordinary condition open to unexpected possibilities, Parrella locates a woman who is subject of her own desires. Unlike her mother, and aligning herself with other unconventional mothers discussed in this thesis, Maria does not give up her self and her desires (including sexual desires) when facing the demands and the role of motherhood.

However, the possibilities of the *spazio bianco* are not unlimited. If this space allows the protagonist to simultaneously speak as a mother and as a daughter, like "two voices emanating from the same body" (Hirsch 199), the interweaving of maternal and filial voice does not create a dialogue between two adult women in the flesh. Maria's account is technically a monologue in which she assumes different perspectives. Even though in the novel three generations of women appear (Maria's mother, Maria and Irene), Maria is the only one who gains voice, agency and subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

One hundred years after Aleramo's claim, the protagonist of *Lo Spazio Bianco* breaks the "monstrous chain" eliminating the maternal figure as a model in the construction of the self as a woman. Unlike other daughters examined in this thesis, the protagonist of *Lo Spazio Bianco* is

emotionally aloof from her maternal model. Maria neither despises nor identifies with the woman who gave birth to her. Her distance from her mother is not a source of pain for her. Maria is more concerned with getting rid of the entire patriarchal system of values than with fighting with the woman who generated her. It can be argued that her mother has died twice, since on the one hand she is physically dead, and on the other hand the female and maternal model she embodied is not an option for Maria. Like Modesta's biological mother in *L'Arte della Gioia*, Maria's only maternal model works as an anti-model and represents the quintessence of what the daughter does not want to be.

However, this circumstance also marks a huge difference between the protagonist of *Lo Spazio Bianco* and the protagonist of *L'Arte della Gioia*. In Parrella's novel the dysfunctional or dead mother does not need to be replaced, while Modesta's independence from her maternal figures does not prevent her from considering them as models to follow, even after their death. Unlike the adult daughters portrayed in Scego's novel, who are still in search of their mothers in an attempt to re-tie a broken knot, Maria does not find it necessary to find herself in a mother-daughter dyad in which she should play a part for which she feels unfit.

Instead of constructing a female genealogy that connects her to her mother and to other women, as the protagonists of *Oltre Babilonia* do, Maria carves out for herself and her newborn daughter an unprecedented white space, a depatriarchalised context in which a different model of woman, mother and mother-daughter relationship is possible. As I have shown in the previous chapters, all the authors are grappling with the challenge to imagine a space where women's lives are not governed by a patriarchal system of values. Murgia's *Accabadora*, the novel that I analyse in the next chapter, suggests another possible way to defy the limits women find in a male-dominated society and to locate a mother-daughter dyad in a de-patriarchalised context.

CHAPTER 5.
Beyond the archetypes: Matricide as a challenge to the marginalisation of the mother-daughter tie in Michela Murgia's Accabadora.

"*Without death there would be no procreation.*"

(Downing, 1981: 66)

"*È forse inevitabile che le figlie incontrino le madri molto tardi,*

a volte addirittura quando è arrivato il tempo degli addii."

(M.Mafai, 11 April 2012)

"*Myth is a riotous and sprawling web of inexhaustible meanings,*

fueled by violence and filled with absurd juxtapositions."

(Jacobs: 20)

In *Accabadora* (The Last Mother, 2009) Michela Murgia (b. 1972) interprets the maternal function in a way that links together the past and the future, combining ancient archetypes and new family paradigms. In this chapter, I analyse Murgia's exploration of motherhood (and of the mother-daughter relationship) at its extreme limits. Not only does Murgia depict a daughter who is the child of several mothers, she also represents a mother whose role is not to give life but take it. The novel problematises the intricacies of the mother-daughter bond through the story of an older woman and a little girl. They become mother and daughter through a voluntary tie rather than bloodlines. Biological and elective motherhood are presented as two different ties, which serve different purposes in a child's life. Far from proposing a simplified opposition of bad mother versus good mother, *Accabadora* suggests that parenthood is a temporary condition, a fact that necessarily affects and reshapes the mother-daughter relationship and its symbolic meaning.

The mother-daughter bond that stems from a meditated choice rather than the hazardousness of bloodlines is a theme that has already been dealt with in this thesis. In Chapter 2, I discussed Sapienza's novel *L'Arte della Gioia*, in which the recurrent representation of the maternal bond is characterised by a lack of biological connections between mother and daughter. However, there is a difference between the two novels. By unfastening the biologically determined bonds Sapienza disputes the validity of the rules on which society is built, when these rules hinder women's freedom. The mother-daughter plot depicted in *Accabadora*, instead, delves into the complexities of the mother-daughter dyad in a fictional world where biological parenthood is only one possibility among others.

The novel is set in a small village in Sardinia during the 1950s. The plot focuses on the unconventional family that the two women form: the childless Bonaria, who is a well-off widow, and the six-year-old Maria, who is the fourth child of a poverty-stricken woman. It all begins the day Bonaria meets Maria and her mother, Anna Teresa, in a shop where the old lady observes the neglected Maria stealing some cherries and hiding them in her pocket. Touched by the child's innocence and loneliness, Bonaria feels a sudden sympathy for Maria, which leads to her decision to adopt the girl as a "fillu de anima", a soul-child. A few weeks later the girl moves to the widow's house and gradually learns to love her adoptive mother and her new life. By choosing each other, Maria and Bonaria become "anima e fill'e anima,"[1] (18) building an unconventional but successful maternal-filial relationship. As Murgia explains, *fillu de anima* is how the status of a child like Maria is defined in Sardinian society and language. "È così che li chiamano i bambini generati due volte, dalla povertà di una donna e dalla sterilità di un'altra" (3).

The unconventionality of their bond is enhanced by Bonaria's social role. In fact, the old woman is highly respected and - to some extent - dreaded in the village, not only for her personal qualities, but also because of her mysterious nocturnal occupation. While during the day Bonaria is a skilled dressmaker, during the night she becomes the *accabadora*, or, in her words, "the last mother" who sooths the terminally-ill and eventually kills them[2], if they wish it. When the adult Maria finds out about Bonaria's role as the *accabadora*, their dyad splits up. Maria suddenly abandons Bonaria as

1 The condition of a *fillu de anima* may resemble that of a foster child, but with at least two significant differences, since the minor is placed in the care of another family following an agreement between the biological family and the hosting family, and with the express consent of the child her/himself. The bond with the family of origin is not severed, and the experience is not as traumatic as adoption or fostering. Furthermore, it is not an institutional procedure, but a social practice. As Murgia maintains, it is rooted in a different logic and context: "La logica dell'affido è: sottrazione alla famiglia d'origine e addizione a una nuova famiglia. Qui abbiamo una moltiplicazione. La pratica dei fill'e anima non sorge in una situazione di conflittualità." Interview with Benedetta Verrini, "Michela Murgia si confessa", *Vita.it*: http://www.vita.it/societa/media-cultura/michela-murgia-si-confessa.html (accessed 6/7/2012).

2 Bonaria carries out something that may resemble euthanansia. However, as I explain below, the author rejects a parallel between *accabadura* and euthanasia.

well as her native village. Only when Bonaria is at the end of her life does Maria come back home and recover her relationship with her adoptive mother, accompanying the old woman on her last journey, and thus taking on the role of *accabadora*.

The practice of *accabadura* is a response to a social necessity in a context of poverty. Murgia underlines the social function of the *accabadora*, a figure entrenched in a rural context of poverty and struggle for survival:

> [...] la sua azione era richiesta per sollevare una famiglia dal peso. Perché, in quell'economia, una persona in quelle gravissime condizioni portava via braccia necessarie ai lavori. Non c'è in gioco la dolce morte ma la sopravvivenza dei sani.[...] L'accabadura è un atto sociale, l'accabadora è una donna che agisce per mandato della comunità in una situazione riconosciuta di necessità da tutti.[3]

As a social act, the *accabadura* has nothing to do with euthanasia, which is entirely an individual choice. The debate on suspension of care was dominant in Italy at the time of the novel's publication and Murgia was aware that her novel could be interpreted as a contribution to this public debate. However, the author does not intend to take a pro-choice position.[4] Murgia rather draws attention to the profound difference between the rural context depicted in her novel, where life and death are a collective responsibility and *accabadura* is a social necessity, and our complex and fragmented society, where the suspension of care is an individual right.[5]

Like *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Oltre Babilonia* and *Lo Spazio Bianco*, *Accabadora* presents a combination of disruption and continuity within the trope of the mother-daughter plot. However, unlike in the three novels previously examined, in *Accabadora* the maternal and filial perspectives do not interweave. Bonaria is exclusively a mother, albeit a particular kind of mother. So are Anna Teresa and, later, Luciana, who is Maria's school-teacher and who, on various occasions, plays a

3 Interview with Marilia Piccone. "Accabadora, Michela Murgia. Un Aiuto per Morire." *Stradanove*, Assessorato alle Politiche Giovanili del Comune di Modena, (29/5/2009): http://www.stradanove.net/v3/sezioni.php?sezione=22&... (accessed 6/7/2012).

4 On the wake of *Accabadora*'s positive outcome, Murgia declared in an interview: "Non vedo alcun dibattito sull'eutanasia. Vedo casi limite portati a paradigma. Non si poteva fare una legge su Eluana. Non voglio che sia l'emergenza, che colpisce alla pancia, a dettare i ritmi della riflessione. Io ho trovato molto più problematica la questione Welby. [...] In quel caso, devo essere sincera, avrei tentennato" (Verrini).

5 In Murgia's words: "L'azione dell'accabadora è antitetica all'eutanasia. Un po' perché s'inserisce in questo discorso di relazionalità in cui si sviluppava anche l'accudimento dei bambini. Oggi viviamo in una realtà molto tecnica e performante, dove ti è richiesto un certo standard per essere pienamente accettato. Tutto quello che scende sotto questa linea, la malattia, la vecchiaia, la morte, è oggetto di una negazione costante. Le basi antropologiche dell'accabadora erano completamente diverse, e quando mi sento dire: "Ah, ma lo facevamo anche noi in Sardegna…", penso che intanto diciamo 'noi', mentre non c'è niente di noi oggi. In una cosa come quella di Eluana Englaro, chi può identificare quale noi c'è stato dietro? L'idea dell'autodeterminazione è tutta moderna. L'idea di scrivere un testamento biologico dove tu escludi chiunque altro dall'intervento non soltanto sul tuo presente, ma addirittura sul futuro, mi sembra un modo per far diventare la solitudine esponenziale" (Verrini).

maternal role in relation to her. Conversely, Maria is exclusively a daughter. The two roles never overlap in the same character.

This simplification is very distant from the interactive arena of the multiple roles that characterise the women in Sapienza's novel, where the protagonist assumes, at different times, both maternal and filial identities, as well as from the rich inter-play of female solidarity that animates Scego's narrative. The outstanding feature in the representation of female characters in Sapienza's novel is exactly their ability to interweave fluid maternal-filial relationships, while they smoothly shift from one role to the other regardless of age or bloodlines. On the contrary, in *Accabadora* the two roles of mother and daughter are neatly separated; parallel, their paths never cross. The representation of the female characters in *Accabadora* locates itself at the opposite end of the spectrum from Parrella's novel. In Parrella's *Lo Spazio Bianco* a woman plays both the role of mother and daughter, relating respectively to her own mother and to her own daughter. On the contrary, in *Accabadora* the two female characters play only one role each and this remains consistent until the end. On the one hand, Murgia draws our attention to this unusual maternal bond, forged out of human solidarity and loneliness, and also to the difficulties arising from the bond itself. On the other hand, the author chooses to neatly separate the mother's role from the daughter's, which emphasises the importance of the only moment in which the switching of roles occurs, that is, at the end of the novel.

Michela Murgia, born in Sardinia in 1972, is a versatile writer who has experimented with different genres since the beginning of her career, although with a constant interest in women's issues. Her first work, *Il Mondo Deve Sapere* (2006), a tragicomic account of a young woman caught in the pitfalls of casual work, was turned into a play with the same title and subsequently inspired the successful film by Paolo Virzì *Tutta la Vita Davanti* (2008). Then, in 2008 the writer published a guide to her native island, *Viaggio in Sardegna.* With *Accabadora* (2009) Murgia received public acclaim in 2010 by winning the prestigious Campiello Prize, the Molinello Award for First Fiction and the Mondello International Literary Prize to name a few. The book has been translated into French, German, Catalan and English.[6] As a writer publicly engaged in the struggle against female exclusion from power, culture, and politics in Italian society, in 2011 Murgia tackled these topics in a non-fictional text, *Ave Mary.* The essay investigates how, over the last 20 centuries, the catholic culture has systematically belittled the role of women in society by offering them an

6 The translations are, respectively*: Accabadora*, translated by Nathalie Bauer, Seuil, Paris: 2011; *Accabadora*, tras. Julika Brandestini, *DTV Deutscher Taschenbuch, 2011; Accabadora*, tras. Mercè Ubach, labutxaca; 1ª ed, 2012; *Accabadora*, tras. Sylvester Mazzarella, Counterpoint, Berkley, 2012.

unachievable female model in the figure of the Virgin Mary, whose celestial perfection creates a sense of frustration and lack of self-esteem in every woman attempting to comply with it.

1. Child of the soul, born from the body: Multiple births of a fill'e anima

Maria has many mothers. Her biological mother, Anna Teresa, defines Maria's birth as a mistake, "l'errore dopo tre cose giuste" (2) often referring to the girl as "l'ultima". Therefore, it is not surprising that Anna Teresa is very prompt to let another woman assume her role as Maria's mother[7] when Bonaria proposes a very generous agreement to her, "tale che alla vedova di Sisinnio Lustru non venisse nemmeno la tentazione di dirle di no" (147). In fact, having given her younger daughter to Bonaria as a *fillu de anima*, in exchange Anna Teresa receives food and money from the well-off Bonaria. Maria's adoptive mother, Bonaria, is presented as Anna Teresa's opposite. Rich and lonely, generous and clever, Bonaria devotes to her "fill'e anima" her undivided, unfailing and unconditional attention.

In spite of the fact that Maria and Bonaria do not call themselves mother and daughter, for thirteen years their maternal-filial relationship seems to be of a superior quality, or at least, "un mondo un po' meno colpevole di essere madre e figlia" (18). Bonaria is an example of what Murgia (2008) defines as "altre madri", that is, women "che si fanno tali non in virtù del legame che ha luogo a partire dal corpo, ma a partire dalla scelta di una per l'altra e dalla relazione che si origina da ciò" (Fortini, 2010: 138). The circumstance of their relationship being based on a voluntary agreement is the key to the success of their happy *ménage*.

Unlike the child carried in the womb, who is unknown and as fortuitous as a blind date,[8] the *fillu de anima* has been chosen through a process that allows full consciousness on both sides, the mother's and the child's. Therefore, in their mother-daughter relationship there is no room for feelings of the guilt that sometimes affect children for not having met their parents' expectations. In addition, Maria and Bonaria share a serene awareness of the peculiar status of their mutual affection. Maria never calls Bonaria "madre" (9) and Bonaria only once addresses Maria as "figlia mia" (26). However, they consider themselves a family. What other people see as an odd combination, "uno strano sodalizio" (17) is the origin of their domestic happiness, which is rooted

7 This is not always the case, as Murgia confirms: "La maggior parte dei casi di fill'e anima avviene per affetto da parte di entrambe le madri e il bambino viene coinvolto, gli si chiede se è d'accordo. Una madre dà via il suo bambino perché in realtà non lo perde in questa maniera, e il bambino acquista un'altra madre" (Piccone).

8 I draw the idea of a simile between the experience of pregnancy and a blind date from Murgia herself, who explains: "A Cabras si usava una parola per definire il bambino dentro la pancia, si diceva: *i strangiu*, che non vuol dire estraneo, vuol dire proprio straniero, sconosciuto. Lo trovo molto bello, perché indica che il bambino è un mistero per la sua stessa madre. E spesso, dopo questo "appuntamento al buio", si passa tutta la vita a farsi perdonare di non essere proprio come ci si aspettava. Tra *anima* e *fill'e anima* questo gioco non comincia mai, perché chi mi ha scelto ha scelto proprio me e mi ha chiesto anche il permesso" (Verrini).

in the “fragile normalità” (17) Bonaria has wisely built for herself and her daughter over the years.

Unlike Bonaria, Maria's biological mother only looks at her as a burden and a resource to be exploited. Only when Maria inherits Bonaria's wealth, indeed, Anna Teresa's feelings toward her youngest daughter change and Maria becomes “quella figlia che dal suo più grosso errore credeva adesso mutata nel migliore dei suoi investimenti” (163). In spite of biology, Maria, “frutto tardivo dell'anima di Bonaria Urrai,” (2) becomes Bonaria's daughter by virtue of an act of love. Maria is aware of the fact that she had two births, the first accidental birth with Anna Teresa and the second, the good one, with Bonaria: “una sbagliata e però anche una giusta” (120). The fact that Maria, like everybody in the village, calls her adoptive mother “tzia Bonaria” should not mislead the reader about the nature of her feelings towards the two maternal figures. As the author clarifies, the terms “mother” and “daughter” describe a biological condition, “sono termini legati al sangue” (Verrini). They do not apply to a relationship like the one between Bonaria and Maria, but this does not imply a belittling of it. More simply, “l’essere fill’e anima è legato alla volontà (Verrini). Murgia is very accurate in the choice of words referring to voluntary kinship. It is a different way of becoming parent and child and therefore it requires a different terminology.

When asked to draw her family at school, the 10 year old Maria portrays Bonaria, whom she considers to be her mother, “la madre naturale,” (22) regardless of the fact that she would not call Bonaria “mamma.” Conversely, her attitude toward Teresa is quite different, lacking any tenderness or warmth. Having experienced a biological mother who wished that she had never been born, “Non l'avessi mai avuta!” (146), Maria reacts “con l'incoscienza indolore di chi non è mai nato veramente” (146) to her mother's aloofness, and is happy to consider Bonaria as the woman who gave her life. As the young Maria explains to Bonaria: “Io credo che voi siete la mia famiglia. Perché noi siamo più vicine” (25). In *L'Arte della Gioia* Modesta shows a similar reaction when she feels rejected and unloved by her biological mother, who, in Modesta's eyes, openly prefers Tina to her (6-7). Like Maria, Modesta finds a non-biological mother who gives her the love she needs. In both novels, a mother-daughter relationship based on a voluntary (and temporary) bond is more effective in satisfying the daughter’s needs, and compensates for the love that the daughter did not receive from her first mother.

Maria also finds a third temporary mother in her former schoolteacher, Luciana, who helps the young woman in making the decision to leave Soreni and the native island to move to Turin. The narrating voice, focalising on Maria's point of view, describes her flight to the big city as a new life: “un'altra vita, le ripeteva Luciana Tellani con decisione, come se fosse niente rinascere” (120). Maria, too, looks at the event as her third birth in chronological order, but the first in which she can take an active role: “Eppure si rivelarono parole adatte [...] la possibilità di determinare almeno una

delle sue troppe nascite, più di ogni altra spinta poteva convincere Maria a partire con tanta rapidità" (120). This is not the first time Luciana plays a maternal function for Maria. As a school teacher, Luciana has achieved the task of transmitting language, in compliance with the maternal role of "matrice della lingua" (Muraro, 1991: 43), even though this is a task that she shares with Bonaria, who carefully supervises Maria's education. Unlike Anna Teresa, who openly manifests her own coarseness by declaring that the girl does not need to continue to go to school after learning how to count money, Bonaria strongly encourages Maria's educational progress. Despite the fact that she is unable to speak Italian to the child, Bonaria, consistent with her maternal duty, insists that Maria learn it at school (24).

The crucial role played by mothers in the transmission of language has already been discussed in Chapter 1. In Chapters 2 and 3 I demonstrated how in Sapienza's and Scego's narratives the transmission of language is an important maternal function. In *L'Arte della Gioia*, Leonora qualifies as a mother because she is the one who introduces Modesta to the world of language. In *Oltre Babilonia*, the oscillation between mother-tongue and other languages becomes for the four protagonists a metaphor of their troubled belonging. Consistent with *Accabadora's* representation of motherhood as a fragmented responsibility, Bonaria and Luciana are the mothers who give language to Maria and accomplish a fundamental maternal task for which Anna Teresa proves to be absolutely unfit.

Having already introduced the notion of *altre madri* in her 2008 work, in *Accabadora* Murgia clarifies how temporary and non-biological parenthood operates. As Bonaria explains to Maria, all human beings need several maternal and paternal figures during their life: "Non c'è nessun vivo che arrivi al suo giorno senza aver avuto padri e madri a ogni angolo di strada" (117). Bonaria, too, is only one of the mothers Maria finds along her way, even though she proves to be the most influential. In the character of Bonaria, motherhood is not based on the centrality of the reproductive function, but hinges on the idea of the maternal as a relational task. In *Accabadora* Murgia shows how the maternal bond is disentangled by biology and becomes a bond of love between women. In doing so, the author echoes Irigaray's critique of patriarchy, which is based on the idea that restraining women to their reproductive role deprives them of subjectivity. In her investigation of the mother-daughter dyad the philosopher's main preoccupation is to consider the identity of women as women, not as mothers, in order to bring to light a female-centred system of significance:

> We do not have to renounce being women in order to be mothers […] It is also necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women.

> *We bring something other than children into the world* […]: love, desire, language, art […] But this creation has been forbidden to us for centuries, and we must re-appropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women (Irigaray, 1991: 42-43 *emphasis mine*).

Muraro's elaborations (1991), too, shed light on Bonaria's maternal role in relation to Maria. In her analysis of the symbolic implication of the mother-daughter relationship, Muraro devalues the biological basis of the mother-daughter bond and hypothesises the "irrilevanza dell'elemento naturale e la rilevanza esclusiva della struttura" (54). In Muraro's view, "la madre biologica può essere sostituita da altre figure senza che la relazione di lei con la sua creatura perda le sue fondamentali caratteristiche" (53-4). On different occasions the novel shows that the maternal figure can be replaced, which recalls the notion of entrustment, that is, the possibility to develop an asymmetric relationship between two women in which the disparity works as a lever for the weaker woman in order to fulfil her desires, as theorised by Italian feminist thinkers. In Chapter 1 I explain how Italian feminist thinkers have elaborated the notion of entrustment, referring in particular to Libreria delle Donne (1987) and to Muraro and Cigarini (1992). In Chapter 2 I have explained how entrustment can only occur outside a patriarchal context. Therefore, it can be argued that the practice of entrustment implies a critique of patriarchy, as Cavarero as observed (2002: 99). In fact, the mother-daughter dyad formed by Bonaria and Maria, based as it is on "una disparità e un debito" (Cavarero, 2002: 99), departs from a patriarchal scheme and prefigures something new in terms of relationships between women.

2. Modes of narrations and maternal subjectivity.

Accabadora is the only novel I discuss in this thesis entirely written using the third person and narrated by an extra-diegetic narrator. This is interesting because in narrations hinged on the mother-daughter bond, the use of self-narration is remarkably predominant, as evidenced in my analyses in Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4. The mode of narration adopted in *Accabadora*, instead, highlights the asymmetry between the maternal and the filial perspective and demonstrates how the two roles never overlap. The third person narration, in fact, emphasises the distinction between the two roles of mother and daughter and puts the reader in a position that is equidistant from both. Even though occasionally the narrating voice assumes the point of view of Maria through the use of an internal focalisation (120-1), it quickly withdraws into omniscience again.

The use of self-narration in *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Lo Spazio Bianco* e *Oltre Babilonia* allows

different degrees of maternal and filial subjectivity. In these novels, the variety of first-person accounts allows mothers and daughters to speak as subjects and to reduce the distance between the different speaking positions. By giving voice to neither position, Murgia's narrative strategy is to create wordless dialogues that allow silence to become a privileged form of communication between women, namely between mothers and daughters. Furthermore, in spite of this ostensible balance between the maternal and the filial points of view, maternal subjectivity assumes a greater emphasis and gradually becomes dominant. But how does the author achieve this effect? In the previous chapters I have discussed how Sapienza, Scego an Parrella bestow the mothers in their novels with subjectivity. *L'Arte della Gioia* traces a journey from daughterly subjectivity to maternal subjectivity, since the two speaking positions belong to the same character at different times. The prominence of the maternal position is marked by the fact that only as a mother can Modesta accomplish her idea of a mother-daughter relationship freed from patriarchal constraints. In Scego's multiplication of the speaking voices, both mothers speak in the first person, but only one of the daughters does, so that in the mother-daughter dialogue maternal subjectivity prevails, in spite of the geometric organisation of the plot. Facing this very dilemma, the protagonist of *Lo Spazio Bianco* wants to develop a mother-daughter relationship which overturns the pattern she has experienced as a daughter. The dialogue with her dead mother, achieved through the reconstruction of her mother's life and of her subjection to patriarchal values, is not an actual dialogue insofar as it has no other interlocutor apart from Maria herself. For this reason, she carves out a de-patriarchalised space of solitude for herself and her daughter. Maria's dialogue with her prematurely born daughter, instead, is a real dialogue, although silent. In fact, Maria communicates with her baby, who is so far excluded from the realm of language, only through the body: she touches her, she feeds and nurtures her, they make skin contact, and eye contact. Likewise, Bonaria, untamed by patriarchal logic, and excluded from the realm of language because of her illness, communicates with her daughter mainly by silence, looks and bodily signs. In both novels, communication is carried out through elements that, according to Irigaray (1991), evoke the sexual difference in speech and point in the direction of a female-centred system of reference.

The emphasis on silence also suggests a comparison with *L'Arte della Gioia* in order to highlight the differences between the two texts. In Sapienza's novel, written 30 years before *Accabadora*, silence is the image of women's subjugation in patriarchy, mainly epitomised by the protagonist's mother, (but also by the self-imposed censorship that the nuns practice in the convent). Therefore, Modesta's storytelling is her way of rejecting the silence to which her mother is resigned, and of gaining for herself subjectivity and the ability to fulfil her desires. Conversely, in *Accabadora* silence is the medium that brings the mother and the daughter together and helps the daughter to

attain the sense of belonging and the liberation she had sought when she left her native village.

This narrative strategy is deployed throughout the novel, but reaches its peak in some crucial moments of the narration. The most intense dialogue between the two women, which occurs immediately before their break-up, becomes wordless when they face the subject of Bonaria's role as the last mother: “Il silenzio si prese la risposta, e Bonaria ritenne di non doverlo infrangere […] Per Maria fu come un discorso intero” (114). Likewise, when Maria returns to Soreni in order to look after the ill Bonaria, their conversations are silent, carried out through mutual looks:

> Non parlavano, non lo avevano mai fatto da quando Maria era tornata – e del resto la vecchia non ci riusciva ancora – *ma si guardavano spesso* nella penombra della stanza, e avevano scoperto che era un modo di comunicare che faceva risparmiare molti equivoci (149 *emphasis mine*).

Bonaria is unable to speak, so that Maria is forced to share Bonaria's silent language. Through her eyes, her body language, her sufferings, her breath, Bonaria finally conveys to Maria the message she could not deliver earlier through her own words. By the means of this non-verbal communication Maria accepts to do what she verbally denied she would ever do (117-8). In the realm of silence women can tell what is unspeakable in the male-centred society of words and turn a murder into a merciful gesture. This is what happens at the end of the novel, in the last 'dialogue' between mother and daughter, when Bonaria persuades Maria to kill her “senza aver mai detto a Maria una sola parola di quelle che voleva pronunciare” as long as “erano solo gli occhi a potersi esprimere” (151). Murgia here seems to follows Irigaray's suggestion (1991) that women invent “a language which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal” (43).

While most characters, namely male characters, put great emphasis on verbal communication (i.e. the priest who struggles to find the words to describe Bonaria during her funeral, Maria's friend Andrìa, who tells her what Bonaria has done to his brother), female characters stand out for their ability to understand the untold, especially when they act as mothers. For instance, when Maria leaves Bonaria's house and moves to Luciana's, the conversation that takes place between the two women is silent: “Se la trovò di fronte con la valigia in mano e nessuna spiegazione buona a motivarla. Ma una non fa la maestra per trent'anni senza capire quando è il momento di non fare domande” (119). This silence is not the patriarchal condition of subjugation in which women have been reduced to silence for centuries, but the female response to male-dominated discourse. As the Belgian philosopher maintains, “silence is all the more alive in that speech exists” (43).

The style of the novel, too, highlights the centrality of the maternal subjectivity. The story is set in a rural context, in the 1950s, but it could be any time. In fact, the flavour of the tale is almost that of a fairy tale. This stylistic choice introduces into the text some features belonging to an oral culture and tradition of which Bonaria is the most significant representative. Her role of *accabadora* complies with unwritten, ancient laws opposed to the civil law. If the former considers the practice of *accabadura* a necessary social function, the latter regards it as a crime. Initially Maria's education locates her outside the unwritten culture and makes her unable to understand the culture Bonaria represents. This difference tears mother and daughter apart, until Maria gradually accepts the unwritten law, which is also unspoken and unspeakable, and embraces her mother's values and role.

3. An odd combination: Life, death and mother-daughter archetypes

Accabadora challenges and problematises what is traditionally understood as a maternal role, that is, "the role of procreator, carer and educator of children" (Giorgio, 2002: 119). In fact, along with the most obvious biological functions of giving birth and feeding, the novel expands the generally accepted notion of maternal tasks and incorporates other social duties that are neither biological, nor necessarily linked with the care of children. The character of Bonaria cuts across the conventional idea of motherhood, which, in Murgia's view, includes tasks that, although nurturing, do not deal with the dawn of life, but its end. As Laura Fortini (2010) highlights, *Accabadora* is a novel devoted to "la figura fondativa della madre, o meglio [alle] diverse possibilità di essere madri – la prima, l'ultima – tutte accomunate dall'assunzione della responsabilità del lavoro di cure" (140).

Scholars from different disciplines such as social sciences, cultural and gender studies, philosophy and history agree that "motherhood weaves together the biological capacities for birth, nursing, and caring and the social skills for rearing, educating, and helping the child towards physical and social growth" (James, 49). Likewise, the feminist analysis of motherhood highlights the combination of biological and social aspects in the maternal role. For a long time, motherhood has been a fragmented responsibility in Italian society, too, where the different tasks of procreating, nursing and upbringing have been carried out by multiple women. Only in the last two centuries have the biological and the social function of motherhood begun to coincide in the same person (D'Amelia, 2005 and 1997).

These two maternal functions are clearly split in the case of Maria's mothers. While Anna Teresa carries out the bodily tasks, Bonaria embodies the non-biological, social interpretations of the maternal function. To begin with, she is Maria's care-giver and nurturer. Then, she provides for

Maria's education and encourages her to learn the Italian language properly. In addition, Bonaria goes even further to broaden the social functions of motherhood, insofar as she is simultaneously the mother who gives life to a child without giving birth, and the mother who brings death as an accepted social necessity.

These two facets of her character are made evident to the reader from the very beginning of the novel. The acts of care-giving and death-bringing hold the same degree of importance in the narrative hierarchy, as well as in the culture in which the novel is set.[9] Murgia skilfully dovetails the great importance she attaches to both. The first phrase of the novel is "Fillus de anima" (soul-children) and its title is *Accabadora*. So, while the narration begins with Bonaria's motherhood and Maria's second birth, the title clearly highlights Bonaria's role as the last mother. Furthermore, both the first word of the book and the title do not belong to Italian but to Sardinian, which Fortini considers as Murgia's mother tongue:

> Una doppia storia di nascita quella che ha luogo nel romanzo, quella della lingua materna, che trova a partire dal titolo accoglienza in un romanzo che guarda non solo alla Sardegna […]; quella della maternità d'elezione […] (137-8).

"Accabadora" is not an Italian word, but a term only used in one of the varieties of Sardinian language, derived from the Spanish verb *acabar*, to terminate, or to put an end to something. In the context of rural Sardinia, the *accabadora* is the woman who provides a merciful death, when this becomes necessary, though scholars disagree about the actual historical existence of such a figure.[10]

9 Murgia herself is aware of the deep the link between the two almost opposite maternal sides of Bonaria, who epitomises a wide range of social functions that nowadays have disappeared: "L'azione dell'accabadora [...] s'inserisce in [un] discorso di relazionalità in cui si sviluppava anche l'accudimento dei bambini" (Verrini).

There are other traces of the proximity of birth and death in the Sardinian rural culture, as this example demonstrates: "A Sindia, al contrario, fino agli anni '80 era possibile affittare prefiche professioniste specializzate in lamentazioni funebri a soggetto. Le "attittadoras" nutrivano il morto in partenza con le loro lacrime. Erano "allattatrici" perché solo chi sa dare la tetta a un bimbo per nutrirlo, è capace della dolcezza estrema di un trapasso assistito". Published in La Stampa, article by Gianluca Nicoletti, "La Femmina terminatrice", (1/5/2005) (accessed 03/08/2012). Although I am not able to confirm the etymology of the term *attittadora*, Murgia considers it acceptable (2009: 178-9).

10 Dolores Turchi's latest work, *Ho Visto Agire s'Accabadora*, Iris, (2008), is an anthropological and well documented research on the figure of *accabadoras* in Sardinia. After examining a wide variety of sources and scholarly works on the topic (including travellers' memoires, historians' investigations, and so on), the author interviews an old woman who eye-witnessed the performance of an a*ccabadora*. Turchi's conclusion is that "la figura *de s'accabadora* non è un'invenzione" (36). Other works on the same topic display a more cautious approach, such as the very recent *Antichi Mestieri e Saperi di Sardegna* (2010). However, this publication does not show the same degree of academic competence and accurate research as Turchi's.

Murgia's approach is very different. When asked if the *accabadora* has ever existed, the writer maintains that, in her mind, the *accabadora* lives only in oral narratives: "Esiste nella narrazione. Si racconta che sia esistita una figura del genere e quindi per me è come se fosse esistita: la narrazione genera mondi dove la gente va ad abitare. C'è una scuola molto severa di antropologi sulla figura dell'accabadora e non tutti sono concordi. Cioè sono tutti d'accordo che ci siano stati episodi di accabadura ma non che sia esistita una figura a cui la comunità deve questo ruolo. In sintesi: accabadura forse; accabadora no" (Piccone).

It is commonly accepted that the practice of killing the terminally ill, called *accabadura*, was sometimes in use. However, there is not sufficient evidence to prove that women *accabadoras* existed as institutionalised figures. In her well documented survey on Sardinian culture (2011) Murgia discusses female roles and figures in traditional Sardinian society. In her words, the *accabadora*

> ha i tratti della leggenda, e sebbene la sua esistenza sia stata più volte attestata specialmente in Barbagia, Barigadu e Gallura, vi sono tuttavia diversi antropologi che ne contestano la funzione e il riconoscimento del ruolo sociale all'interno delle comunità in cui ne è stata ritrovata traccia. […] le testimonianze sul suo operato giungono certe almeno fino al 1952 quando nel paese di Orgosolo fu arrestata una donna accusata di aver prativato questa funzione su uno specifico moribondo (180).

The nurturing attitude, which is a distinguishing feature of the maternal role, is equally necessary to foster life as well as to terminate it, as Murgia explains:

> Spesso l'accabadora era anche la levatrice del paese, 'sa femina pratica', era la donna esperta, colei che sa che cosa fare quando è necessario farlo. Perciò era chiamata in diversi momenti della vita: la nascita e la morte (Interview with Piccone).

Birth and death are represented as two inseparable aspects of existence and this is why a mother is needed to supervise both. In order to define her function as a carrier of death, it is Bonaria herself who chooses the term 'mother' so as to underline the social importance of her task: "Anche io avevo la mia parte e l'ho fatta [...] Io sono stata l'ultima madre che alcuni hanno visto" (117). Hence, in the multiplicity of parental figures that human beings meet during their life, the *accabadora* too is a mother, albeit the last one.

It is worth investigating at this point where this broadened idea of motherhood comes from. What kind of mother does Murgia depict? Why does she carry death as part of her duties? How does the familiarity with death affect the relationship with the daughter? And if the *accabadora* is a necessary social function, as it is, why is the role exclusively female?

Although the idea of a mother who kills as a social function is something new in the representations of the mother-daughter relationship authored by contemporary Italian women writers, the association of these two ends of life with femininity and with the mother-daughter tie is not unheard of in Western culture. In fact, in ancient Greek mythology the archetypal representation of the mother-daughter dyadic relationship is deeply intertwined with the natural cycles of life and

death. Aware that the apparent meaning of stories in myth conceals unconscious contents, the French anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss realised that these psychic, social, and symbolic structures were universal formulations that can determine socio-symbolic realities.

The mother, the daughter and death are three constitutive elements of the myth of Demeter and her daughter.[11] Demeter is the goddess of harvest, agriculture and fertility, and her name purposely echoes the mother earth. Her name in Greek, **Δημήτηρ**, **(**de-meter) incorporates the word **μήτηρ**, mother. The daughter, known as Kore or Persephone, is the goddess of the underworld. The myth is associated with two religious cults, the Thesmophoria and the Eleusinian Mysteries, celebrated in honour of the two goddesses. Since its first appearance, by the middle of the second millennium BC, the myth is connected to the underworld[12] and binds together "the life-giving, death-bringing forces of the earth" (Scully, 1979: 70-9).

Well before *Accabadora*, literature addressed the figure of the death-bringing/life-giving mother and her relationship to her daughter. The story of Demeter and Kore has been variously re-elaborated within the literary repertoire of classical civilisation. In ancient Greek literature, the oldest text dedicated to the Eleusinian myth is the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter.* Written approximately in the eighth century BC, it qualifies as

> a mother-daughter narrative, not only the story of intense mother-daughter attachment and separation, but also the story of both the mother's and the daughter's reactions and responses [...] They connect to the images of Freudian psychoanalysis, such as the pre-Oedipal, and to the anthropological and archaeological research of matriarch theorists of the 1920s (Hirsch 35).

The subsequent interpretations[13] variously combine death and the mother-daughter tie, inasmuch

11 This mythological account is one of the most powerful images of femininity in the ancient world and the only one exclusively centred on female figures. In classic Greek mythology Demeter's daughter is raped and abducted by Ades, the god of the underworld and Demeter's brother. The mischief happens with the consent and endorsement of Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods. Having been violently separated from her daughter, Demeter starts looking for her in despair, refusing to fulfil her duty to bring forth blossoms and fruits. As a consequence, the earth becomes barren and human beings are threatened with starvation. The conflict between Demeter and the male gods ends with a compromise. Persephone will spend six months with her husband, and six months with her mother. Nature, therefore, will bring forth flowers and fruits again, which will then wilt at Kore's departure for the underworld. Persephone's existence, forever split between the two worlds, overshadows the natural cycle of the seasons, which from then on includes an endless alternation between life and death.

12 The Hungarian scholar Karl Kerenyi maintains that the meaning itself of the term «Eleusis» refers to the underworld, in K.Kerenyi, *Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 23.

13 In ancient Greek and Latin literature, a wide range of texts mentions the story of Demeter and her daughter. Besides the nameless author of the *Hymn to Demeter*, other poets dealt with or mentioned it in the subsequent centuries: Hesiod in his *Theogony*, Apollodorus in his *Library*, Euripides in *Helen* (lines 1301-52) and Sophocles in his *Oedipus at Colonus*, to name a few. In the Latin literature, too, poets gave an account of this ancient chthonian myth. The most important among them is Ovid. He wrote twice about Demeter and Persephone, giving two different interpretations of the same story in *Fasti* and in *The Metamorphosis*.

as the myth of Demeter and Persephone dovetails “the human fear of death and hope for immortality” with “the deep bond that exists between women, particularly mothers and daughters” (Downing: 1994: 1).

The myth of the mother-daughter dyad and its connections with the earth's seasonal cycle is also believed to belong to an archaic pre-patriarchal civilisation spread over the Mediterranean coasts, as theorised by the Swiss jurist and classicist Johann Jakob Bachofen (1861). When the rule of the mother was over, the myth of Demeter and her daughter survived and adapted to patriarchy.[14] However, regardless of the myth's connections to a matriarchal society, what matters to my investigation here is that several elements constituting the myth's structure are still recognisable in the plot of *Accabadora*. Maria's decision to abandon her mother is due to the clash between a mother-centred culture embodied by Bonaria, and The-Law-of-the-Father, to which Maria has temporarily given her allegiance. However, the novel suggests an interesting outcome of the struggle between matriarchal and patriarchal cultures, in that the mother is not defeated. In fact, Maria ends up reappraising the maternal, initially rejected, system of values.

An interesting aspect of Bachofen's theory is that it is not based on archaeological or anthropological data, but on some psychological elements of the myth. For this reason, it seems to anticipate the Jungian notion of archetypes, as universal mental structures belonging to the collective unconscious. A few decades later Hungarian classicist Karl Kerenyi[15] considered Demeter as a figure who epitomises birth and death as the emblem of a universal principle of life. Kerenyi's insights paved the way to Carl Gustav Jung's elaboration about the myths of ancient Greece, which he considers as the embodiment of archetypal realities. In the chapter written for Kerenyi's *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (1993), Jung acknowledges the centrality of this mother-daughter dyad to the female psyche. Furthermore, arguing that the myth representing the *great mother* and the

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Recently, the myth of Demeter and her lost daughter has become again a source of inspiration for writers and thinkers. Scholar Christine Downing (1994) has explored the flourishing of its multiple interpretations occurred over the last few decades. This re-appraisal of the ancient myth is a result of an urge felt by women scholars and writers to recover a mythography “of their own”. As Downing states referring to Demeter and Kore: “Some women have found in this myth resources for the imaginal re-creation of a pre-patriarchal matristic, that is, woman centred, world. Many.. have seen it as primarily in terms of how it valorizes the beauty and power of the mother-daughter bond. Others have focused on Hades' abduction of Persephone and read the myth primarily a story about paternal violation... about the rise of patriarchy and the suppression of goddess religion” (2-3).

14 In *The Lost Goddesses of Early Greece* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 24 Charlene Spretnak investigates the myth of Demeter and Persephone in pre-patriarchal perspective. Her work is a re-imagining of a lost tradition, aiming at a re-appraisal of the female presence in myth and history. Her hypothesis is based on the analysis of the same sort of sources (texts, manufactures) used by other scholars to draw different conclusions. A more cautions approach characterises the essay of Vera Bushe, who, although recognising the existence of a pre-Olympian body of myths, believes that “in order to understand ourselves in the world today we have to understand self in patriarchy […] Because modern women are products of patriarchy, patriarchal myths help us to understand who we are and how we react to living under patriarchy” (“Cycles of Becoming” in Downing: 173-4).

15 Among the wide number of essays written by Kerenyi on Greek myth I refer to those which provide the most useful insights on the Demeter-Kore dyad: *The Gods of the Greek*, (1982) and *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (1993).

maiden (157, italics in the original) extended feminine consciousness beyond the limit of time and space, Jung contends that:

> We could therefore say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter (162).

So, if anthropologists' findings have shed light on the myth's capacity to mirror social realities and cultural and psychic structures, Jung's insight links this myth about mother, daughter and death to women's unconscious and psyche.

Over the last few decades the association of the archetypal mother-daughter dyad and death attracted the attention of numerous female scholars.[16] Feminist thinkers did not fail to notice the association between feminine and death, which characterises most of patriarchal cultures. As Hélène Cixous famously argued: "Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex" (885). Her statement is echoed by Julia Kristeva, who contends that "the unrepresentable nature of death was linked with that other unrepresentable [...] which, for mythical thought, is constituted by the female body" (1989: 27).

As this overview shows, the idea of the *accabadora* as "the last mother," combining motherhood and death, has its deepest roots in a wide cultural, historical and social background and cannot be disjointed by its necessary complement, that is, the relationship to the daughter. However, although recalling some crucial aspects of the ancient myth of Demeter and Persephone, *Accabadora* goes further. In the destiny of Demeter and Kore, feminist scholars such as Irigaray, Cavarero and others have seen a severance of female genealogy.[17] Representing the feminine as overwhelmed by patriarchal supremacy, the myth describes

> un ordine simbolico della Grande Madre, sconfitto e cancellato dalla società patriarcale, che ne stravolge il significato originario consegnando tuttavia al contesto tracce evidenti del misfatto […] Il tema centrale del mito è [...] dunque la *potenza matern*a, inscritta nell'intera natura […] che custodisce il luogo umano del venire al mondo ma anche il

16 For a detailed survey of scholars' and writers' recent interest in the myth of Demeter and Kore, see Downing (1994), Part Two and Three. Among feminist scholars, many tackled the connection of the Eleusinian mother-daughter myth to female psyche. To name a few: Rich (*Of Woman Born* 1976), Hirsch (*The Mother-Daughter Plot*, 1989), Cavarero (*Nonostante Platone* 1990), Irigaray (*Sexes and Genealogies*, 1991), Lusiardi («Demetra e il Figlio della Regina» , in Diotima *L'Ombra della Madre*, 2007: 125-49).

17 According to Shelley Phillips (1991), the myth "exhibits the lessening of the power and unity of the Great Mother Goddess. Persephone's rape in the Greek myth can be seen as symbolising the power of men over women, under patriarchy, and that the mother-daughter relationship is subject to the same power of men. In the original pre-patriarchal legend such was not the case. Moreover, in the original, the daughter, Persephone, and her mother, Demeter, are two aspects of one Great Goddess" (*Beyond the Myths*, 230-1).

> nulla come il non più della nascita, la fine del *continuum materno* […] che disegna la radice femminile di ogni umano (Cavarero, 1990: 66-7 *emphasis mine*).

In *Accabadora* this continuity (*continuum materno*) is not interrupted, but merely disengaged from biological bonds. Maria considers Bonaria as her 'natural' mother (22), in spite of lacking any bodily and genetic connection. The separation of the daughter from her mother, which feminist theorists interpret as the sign of the defeat of the Great Mother, here assumes multiple meanings. In fact, the separation occurs twice for Maria: the departure from her biological mother, which implied no trauma, and the separation from Bonaria, which, although caused by circumstances very different from the myth, leads, as in the myth, to a new balance in the mother-daughter relationship.[18] Only after her reunion with Bonaria is Maria able to accept what Cavarero defines as the "'segreto femminile' della vita" (71) in relation to the maternal power, that is, "la […] potenza di generare e non generare" (71). If death is a central part of a male-dominated symbolic horizon (Cavarero, 74), its inclusion in a female mythology can be read in two different ways: as a defeat of a matrilineal society, performed through the weakening of matriarchal archetypes, or as the announcement of a new era of mother-daughter relationships. This new era is heralded by a mother-daughter dyad which, on the one hand, moves beyond biology towards a notion of temporary parenthood, and, on the other hand, finds its validation in the voluntary acceptance of the twofold meaning of the dreadful maternal power.

As in the myth of Demeter and Kore, there is an underlying connection in *Accabadora* between life and death that characterises the daughter's relationship to the mother, although there are completely different outcomes. Not only does *Accabadora* attempt to rectify the erasure of the mother in patriarchal cultures, but, through the recovery of powerful female archetypes, also locates the mother-daughter couple in a more favourable context, and prefigures the construction of a female frame of reference, unrelated to a male-dominated mode of symbolisation. In the construction of this symbolic order disentangled from a patriarchal law, the death of the mother plays a relevant role.

4. A controversial bequest: Matricide, maternal legacy and 'continuum materno'

Unable to accept Bonaria's secret role as the last mother, which she considers an immoral practice, Maria left Bonaria's home. Her return a few years later to look after the old woman who had become terminally ill, is not only a way of repaying her debt of "fill'e anima", but also a

18 Maria's act of «andare» and «tornare» (Fortini, 2010: 123-43) is also relevant in light of Murgia's attachment to her cultural roots. According to Fortini, the act of leaving and coming back reproduces an attitude that is characteristic of Sardinian people, notably writers.

journey that leads her to understand Bonaria's reasons for doing what she had done. Forced to witness Bonaria's long agony, Maria gradually understands the loving side of the function of the *accabadora*. Only then is she able to forgive Bonaria and to accept her complex legacy, which implies Maria's acting as a last mother to the old woman. The reunion of mother and daughter after the daughter's departure retraces the Demeter and Kore myth while providing a revised interpretation of it. In Greek mythology Kore's return to Demeter allows the mother's continuity as the master of life and death on earth in a cyclical, endless repetition in which mother and daughter are crystallised in their respective roles. In *Accabadora*, instead, Maria comes back home to take her mother's place, in a dynamic, evolving perspective. It is through the act of replacing Bonaria, by killing her, that Maria secures maternal continuity, that is the transmission of the "segreto femminile" of combining the power of life-giving and death-bringing forces in the same person.

Even though the murder is committed as an act of love and pity, and in compliance with her mother's will, Maria's gesture qualifies as matricide. A mother-daughter relationship reaching its climax with matricide is extremely interesting for my investigation, especially in terms of symbolic meanings. This mother-daughter dyad reveals an underlying, secret connection to death since the beginning, by virtue of the mother's role as the last mother. However, the interplay of the mother-daughter dyad with death goes even further so as to include the murder of the mother at the hand of the daughter as the natural evolution of the relationship itself. In *Accabadora*, matricide occurs as an act of reconciliation and is shown as part of a necessary process through which the daughter, assuming for a moment the mother's role, comes to terms with the maternal bequest. The very act of killing Bonaria is Maria's way of accepting her mother's identity, legacy and values.

In Chapter 2 I have already discussed matricide in relation to *L'Arte della Gioia*, whose protagonist kills three maternal figures. However, there are some crucial differences between Sapienza's and Murgia's interpretations of the matricidal act. In *L'Arte della Gioia* the mother has to be murdered in order to disrupt the patriarchal system of which she is an upholder. By causing the death of all her mothers (i.e. the biological parent as well as the two women who acted as mothers to her by choice), Modesta frees herself from an unwanted maternal burden and creates a non patriarchal context for her children, and especially for her daughters. Conversely, when Maria kills Bonaria, she consciously accepts and validates the maternal model offered by her adoptive mother. Moreover, even though Maria has experienced a multiplicity of maternal figures (Anna Teresa, Luciana and Bonaria), she commits matricide only against the most significant of the three. Unlike *L'Arte della Gioia*, where Modesta kills her mothers against their will, and unbeknown to them, there is no hostility in Maria's gesture, but recognition. Matricide here is not performed against the mother, but for her sake, while the symbolic meaning of her act exceeds its mere bodily

implications.

If matricide is accomplished in the name of the mother, as a form of reconciliation and as a demonstration of filial devotion, what does Maria's act mean exactly? What are the symbolic implications of a daughter murdering her mother? To answer these questions it is useful to look at how psychoanalysis interprets the symbolic murder of parental figures as a necessary event in the construction of the self. According to Kristeva, "matricide is our vital necessity," (1989: 27). Kristeva's words refer to the fact that, in her psychoanalytical theory, becoming a subject for a child requires that he/she has to differentiate from the mother and from her body. Since this separation is psychically violent and painful, she refers to the process as a "matricidal act".

Conversely, in classical psychoanalysis (i.e., Freudian psychoanalysis) it is patricide that holds a great deal of importance, insofar as the loss of the father determines a genealogical transmission of cultural bonds between father and son. This transmission is the engine that allows Western (patriarchal) cultures and kinship systems to develop and thrive. Given the deep relation between the experience of loss and the capacity to create symbolic structures, patricide works as a structural loss which generates symbolic organisation. According to Freudian theory, it is the irreversibility of the loss that allows for the transmission of the symbolic fertility between father and son. Unlike patricide, matricide is a theme which has not been theorised in classical psychoanalysis. As theorist and literary critic Amber Jacobs (2007) states, "matricide constitutes an unacknowledged and untheorised underlying phantasy structure that is excluded from Freud's structural theory of Oedipus" (33). The mother's death is not perceived as irreversible (or is not perceived as loss at all), so that it only gives rise to a sterile loss (Jacobs, 2007).

Lacanian theory reinforces the imbalance between matricide and patricide: patricide is theorised as a prohibition or a law that generates a symbolic structure known as The-Law-of-the-Father. Matricide, instead, has not been translated into clear conceptual terms.[19] This problematic aspect of the symbolic meaning of the death of the mother is to some extent echoed by Murgia in her essay *Ave Mary* (2010). While presenting the worship of the Virgin Mother in Catholic tradition as a cultural construction aimed at censoring women when their desires depart from their iconised roles as mothers and wives, Murgia highlights that the mother of God never dies. Despite the emphasis given to the death of her son, Mary's departure from earthly life is never described, and apparently never takes place. In Murgia's uncompromising argumentation, this repression is part of a complex cultural and social strategy whose purpose is to belittle women through the censorship on their bodily reality, including death.

19 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Trans Alan Sheridan, London: Routledge/Tavistock, 1977, see also: André Green, *The Dead Mother: the Work of Andreé Green*, ed. Gregorio Kohon. London: Routledge, 1999. See also Jacobs, 2007: 62.

The asymmetry between the symbolisation of patricide and matricide is deeply rooted in our culture from its origins, and is duly mirrored in Greek mythology. As Miglena Nikolchina (2004) observes,

> while patricide leads Oedipus, the murderer, into exile and transforms him by making him bend to the inscrutable will of the gods, matricide, on the contrary, is the promise for a return from exile for the murderer Orestes (93).

This difference in the symbolical interpretation of the two concepts is uncanny and deserves further examination. The dead mother's lack of symbolic generativity is very close to what Kristeva, within the ambit of Lacanian psychoanalisis, calls “asymbolia”, the lack of meaning. For Kristeva, asymbolia is the ultimate evolution of melancholia, that is, a psychic condition that affects subjects who did not overcome the traumatic experience of being separated from their first love object, the mother: “If I am no longer capable of translating and metaphorising, I become silent and I die” (1989: 42). Like the subject affected by asymbolia, in psychoanalytic theory the mother too is denied any symbolic fertility. Therefore, although forged to define a clinical condition, the concept of asymbolia works well also in describing matricide as the impossibility, for women, of transmitting social bonds and alternative unconscious structures in the name of the mother.

In light of Kristeva's elaborations, can we hypothesise that Maria is affected by a condition of asymbolia? I argue that this is not the case because Maria is located in a different position in relation to the loss of the mother. Murgia's novel, therefore, paves the way for a re-reading of matricide in fiction. Facing the dilemma of conceptualising matricide, Jacobs (2007) postulates that matricide needs to be theorised as a different type of equally irreversible loss, not reducible to the logic of patricide. In this way the loss of the mother, disengaged from the condition of asymbolia, would enable women to mediate mother-daughter relations while allowing for the transmission of a maternal genealogy. Since *Accabadora* is built on a mother-daughter relationship that culminates in a matricidal act, it is worth investigating whether and how the novel suggests something new in relation to the possibility for women to transmit alternative cultural paradigms based on the law of the mother.

As I have already discussed in Chapter 1, the dominant symbolic order, shaped by the rule of the father, is founded on the exclusion of the mother as a subject position and finds its symbolical representation in the myth of Oedipus.[20] This paradigm provides the mother-daughter pair no

20 In the Oedipal structure the paternal is the third term that interrupts the mother-child proximity creating a position from which to think and speak. The importance of structure in psychoanalysis consists in that it protects from psychosis. As Jacobs explains, structure “allows for the differentiation and the capacity of thought. Structure protects from the fusion of a too-close proximity; it creates space to think” (27).

structural element to break from the dyad, because it does not offer a female symbolic mediation. As Kristeva observes (1986), in Western culture[21] women can access the symbolic order only through the father, a circumstance which leads them to a crippling dilemma: identifying with the mother and therefore accepting being reduced to the silent Other within a patriarchal society, or identifying with the father, and therefore being alienated from themselves. A possible way to move beyond this *impasse* can be to theorise matricide as an "alternative process that could provide the crucial differentiating function but without cutting the daughter off from her mother" (Jacobs: 6-7).

With this purpose in mind, Jacobs looks for mythological sources that could offer a plurality of unconscious structures that are not represented in the Oedipal paradigm. It is the myth of Orestes[22] and his matricidal act, as narrated by Aeschylus in the *Oresteia*, which allows Jacobs to broaden the horizons of Oedipal logic. The re-reading of the myth suggested by Jacobs allows me to expand and complement the mythological and archetypal sources through which I analyse *Accabadora*. Aligning Clytemnestra, the mother murdered by her children, with Demeter, the inconsolable mother who has lost her daughter, it is possible to uncover the profound cultural roots of the two pivotal elements on which Murgia's novel is built. If the first myth helped me to frame the mother-daughter relationships depicted in the novel within the structure of the archetypal mother-daughter dyad and its connections to life and death, the analysis of the second myth sheds light on the symbolic implications of matricide for Maria.

The two myths share some crucial aspects that are not evident at first sight. First and foremost, both are characterised by a markedly feminine agency. In the myth of Demeter and Kore it is more evident because women are a dominant presence. In *Oresteia* women's centrality is less patent, however every point of narrative development is generated or achieved by female figures. The second affinity between the two mythological accounts is the presence of death as a constitutive element, variously interwoven with the mother-daughter dyad. Thirdly, both myths hinge on the threatening figure of an angry mother (respectively, Demeter and Clytemnestra) who has been violently separated from her daughter.

Furthrmore, the *Oresteia* presents the reader with a multiple mother-daughter combination, since

21 According to Kristeva, a patriarchal turn in Western Culture occurred when patriarchal monotheism (that is, Judaism first and then Christianity) prevailed over an earlier maternal religion and marginalised women by excluding them from the symbolic order (141-3).

22 The myth of Orestes and his ill-fated family is one of the most important in ancient Greek mythology and literature. Orestes is the son of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, and of his wife Clytemnestra. The couple also have three daughters: Iphigenia, Chrysothemis and Electra. At the outbreak of the war against Troy, Agamemnon accepts sacrificing the life of his daughter Iphigenia to appease the wrath of an offended goddess. When the Greek army finally returns from war, ten years later, Clytemnestra revenges her daughter's death by killing her husband and his concubine with the help of her lover Aegistus. In this gruesome family, every murder triggers another one, and the bloodbath is unrelenting. After the assassination of their father, Orestes and Electra yearn for vengeance too. While Electra plots the matricide, Orestes is the perpetrator. For this reason he stands trial, is acquitted and, with the help of Apollo and Athena, founds a new public order.

Clytemnestra has three daughters. This is a circumstance undeservedly overlooked in the psychoanalytic and literary interpretation of the myth, because the three sisters play very different roles. They are, respectively, a victim of the patriarchal order, a "father's daughter"[23] and a "mother's daughter."[24] The death of Iphigenia, immolated by her father in order to win the Trojan war, is the reason why Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon. Her act stirs up the matricidal hatred and the bloodthirsty fury of her second daughter, Electra. Unlike her two sisters, Chrisothemis is not a victim of paternal ambitions as Iphigenia, nor does she identify with hime. She enjoys a relationship to her mother which is not as conflictual as Electra's, and it is not a coincidence that she remains a shadowy figure compared to her sisters.[25]

The three daughterly positions in *Oresteia* are very different from Maria's. There is no hatred against the mother in her act, so that it raises the question: What is the symbolical meaning of a matricide committed as an act of love for the mother, and not as a revenge in The-Name-of-the-Father? Maria differs profoundly from the mythological matricidal daughter who identifies completely with the father. However, considering Maria only as "her mother's daughter" (according to Sophocles' definition), that is, opposed to the father's daughter Electra, belittles the complexity of the socio-symbolic frame underlying the novel. First and foremost, in Maria's experience as a daughter there is no father. Her two mothers, Bonaria and Teresa, are both widows prior to Maria's birth. As a consequence, the girl lacks any familiarity with the idea of fatherhood: "Con l'idea che si potesse essere figlie di un padre non aveva particolare confidenza" (8). The focus of the narration concentrates exclusively on the maternal tie, showing that Maria is beyond Kristeva's dilemma of the daughter's troubled identification with both the parental figures within a male-dominated culture.

In the previous chapters I have already discusses how in *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Oltre Babilonia* and *Lo Spazio Bianco* fathers are unknown, absent, unfit, rejected or have voluntarily resigned from their paternal role. However, in Sapienza's, Scego's and Parrella's novels the paternal absence has variously affected the mother's life or depends on the mother's decision to keep her distance from a patriarchal domination. *Accabadora* moves even further. Here the mothers do not have to negotiate with the paternal figure at all. As Murgia admits, in her novel men are a shadowy, insignificant presence: "È vero: ho scritto un romanzo di uomini morti anche quando sono vivi" (Piccone). If male figures are insignificant, fathers definitely demonstrate this characteristic. In this uncommon

23 This is how the chorus in *Oedipus at Colony*, Sophocles' last tragedy, calls Electra.

24 This is how Electra spitefully defines Chrisothemis. In Sophocles, *Electra*, lines 396-99.

25 As a character, Chrisothemis failed to attract the attention of poets. Several tragedies have been dedicated to Iphigenia's and Electra's tragic fate. To name a few: Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' four texts: *Electra*, *Orestes*, *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, up to the twentieth century opera composed by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hoffmanstal, *Electra*. Chrisothemis, instead, is only ever mentioned in passing (see Jacobs: 178-9).

horizon, they do not exist at all.

Through the absolute preeminence given to the maternal function, I suggest that in the novel something new is emerging in terms of symbolic order. Maria, a fatherless daughter, is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Athena, the motherless goddess who, in *Oresteia*, stands up in defence of The-Name-of-the-Father. Through the character of Maria, the daughter who has never met a father, *Accabadora* provides an example of the "restructuring capacity" (Jacobs: X) of Greek myth. Murgia seems to interrogate and then rewrite the socio-symbolic exclusion of the mother in patriarchal cultures. In fact, the matricide enacted in the novel does not create severance from the mother, but continuity with her. It does not work as a disavowal, but as a recognition of the maternal role. In other words, matricide in *Accabadora* is interpreted as a generative loss that can transmit social bonds. Thus, I consider Murgia's novel a fictional translation of Jacobs' hypothesis that a re-reading of the myths about Athena and her mother Metis allows "the representation and symbolisation of heterogeneous diverse structuring of the mother-daughter relation(s)" (72). The examination of *Accabadora* via the mythological mother-daughter pairs suggests that fiction focusing on the erased mother-daughter relationship could be instrumental in changing women's perception and representation of themselves as mothers and as daughters.

As the three daughters of Clytemnestra multiply the filial perspectives in *Oresteia*, the same happens to the event of matricide, which occurs twice. In fact, before the assassination of Clytemnestra, another matricide had occurred in the Oresteian saga. From Hesiod's *Theogony* we learn that Metis, the goddess of wisdom, was raped, made pregnant and finally swallowed together with her unborn child by Zeus. Later, Athena, Metis' and Zeus' daughter, sprang out of the father's head as a consequence of the father having cannibalised the mother. Forgetful of her origin, in *Oresteia* Athena disavows her mother and declares that matricide signifies no loss. Thus, when debating in the Athenian court the charges against Orestes for shedding his own blood, the goddess casts the decisive vote for his acquittal.[26] Athena's response demonstrates her complete allegiance to the male (Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, in *The Oresteia*, Athena's speech, lines 735-40). Both Athena's and Apollo's declarations in the tragedy entail the legitimation of matricide through the belittling of the maternal function. The effects of the concealed matricide (Metis) provide a justification for the patent murder of the mother (Clytemnestra).

In the Aeschylean version of the myth, Athena, the motherless daughter[27], seems unaware of the

26 Being born from her father, Athena stands as the witness for the dispensability of the mother. Using Athena's case as an example, Apollo explains that the mother is only a nurse and does not take part in procreation. The child is said to have one parent, the father, who is the primary author of identity and can generate without a mother. Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, in *The Oresteia*, Apollo's speeech, lines 657-667.

27 Athena is not the only motherless goddess in Greek mythology. According to Plato, "the heavenly Aphrodite is [a goddess] in whose birth the female has no part" (*Symposium*, 180d-181).

censorship that erased the story of her own mother. The disavowal of Metis justifies the denial of Clytemnestra's rights as a mother, while the combination of the two murders reveals how "the female generative capacity was and continues to be written out of our dominant mythologies" (Jacobs: 69). In *Accabadora* Murgia problematises the female generative capacity in relation to matricide, while inscribing it within a mother-daughter plot. In the novel, the murder of the mother is not committed in the-Name-of-the-Father, but outside the paternal law. If Murgia's text aligns itself with feminist theorists with respect to the symbolic importance attached to matricide, it certainly differs in the way matricide is interpreted. Irigaray, whose work has paved the way to Jacobs' investigation, contends that our society and our culture "function on the basis of a matricide" (1986: 36). In regard to the *Oresteia*, Irigaray states that Clytemnestra had to be killed by her son, "because the rule of the God-Father and the appropriation of the archaic powers the mother-earth require it" (37). After Clytemnestra's death, both of the matricidal children go mad. However, Orestes recovers, Electra does not, so that "the murder of the mother results, then, in the non punishment for the son, and the burial of women in madness" (Irigaray: 37). However hidden (Metis), or denied (Clytemnestra), matricide is the symbolic murder on which Western culture is based, because, as Irigaray contends, the social order dictates the exclusion and the erasure of the mother (1991: 36).

The madness of Electra as a consequence of her mother's death is a symbolic representation of the difficult position of the daughter within a symbolic order shaped by a male imaginary, and accounts for the pathologies of the mother-daughter relationship.[28] Therefore, rethinking matricide is essential in developing a female symbolic paradigm whose lack, at present, accounts for the dysfunctionality of this relationship. Murgia has taken on this task.

If, as Jacobs postulates, myth can be reworked to allow diverse imaginaries to come into being, by re-writing the symbolic meaning of matricide, *Accabadora* attempts to allow the mother a genealogical transmission of her social and cultural bonds. To begin with, *Accabadora* overturns the conditions in which the transmission of maternal legacy occurs. As I have explained earlier in this chapter, scholars from different fields such as Cavarero (1990 and 1997), Jung (1993), Chodorov

28 As Jacobs maintains: "The patriarchal symbolic is organised in such a way that it precludes any structural mediation of the mother-daughter relation and thus leaves it susceptible to extreme pathology" (131). The author discusses the topic even further in her article: "The Potential of Theory: Melanie Klein, Luce Irigaray, and the Mother-Daughter Relationship" in *Hypatia*, Volume 22, Number 3, Summer 2007, pp. 175-193.
Discussing a group of mother-daughter dyads in myth, Jacobs questions their symbolic function and goes even further as to argue that Demeter-Kore, Clytemnestra-Iphigenia and Jocasta-Antigone "rather than offering women a representation of a mediated relation, in fact work in the service of the male imagery (to which they belong) that systematically forecloses the relation between women and instead [...] constructs these simulacra of mother-daughter couples with the aim of collapsing the mother and the daughter into one position in order then to exclude it from the dominant structure" (138). Irigaray, too, examines the unfair treatment of the mother-daughter relationship in myth and Western culture in "A Chance for Life", in *Sex and Genealogies* (188-9) and urges for the creation of "yet-to-be" female imaginaries.

(1979) and others single out the existence of a matrilineal mother-daughter continuity, taking place through the act of giving birth. Muraro refers to the “continuum materno” (1991: 54) as this possibility for women to replicate themselves forward and backward through generations by virtue of the mother-daughter chain. In *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Lo Spazio Bianco* and *Oltre Babilonia* women question this maternal transmission, especially when facing the experience of motherhood, that is, when they have to choose whether, and to what extent, they will hand on to the new generation of women the cultural, psychological and social legacy they received from their mothers.

For Maria, the protagonist of *Accabadora,* this continuity manifests itself in a different way, since she takes her mother's place not in giving birth to another daughter, but in giving death to her mother. Even compared to *L'Arte della Gioia*, where matricide is a pivotal component of the mother-daughter relationship, *Accabadora* introduces a new perspective. In *L'Arte della Gioia* Modesta severs her umbilical cord through the matricidal act. On the contrary, in *Accabadora* Maria re-ties the maternal-filial knot by murdering Bonaria. Consistently with the fact that this mother has not gone through the bodily experience of pregnancy and delivery, the point of contact and severance between this mother and daughter is not the daughter's birth, but the mother's death. This aspect is enhanced by an extremely accurate use of the words in the novel: when describing Bonaria's death, the narrating voice, which is focalised on Maria's point of views, states that “sua madre Bonaria Urrai era morta” (162). The use of the word “mother” between Maria and Bonaria here is extremely significant, since this is the only time it occurs in the novel. Thus, it is matricide, not birth giving, that produces lineage in *Accabadora*. Even though matricide is widely discussed in feminist and psychoanalytical theory, it has not been theorised yet as an alternative feminine-specific source of lineage, structure and generation. According to Miglena Nikolchina, (2004: 5) matricide is perpetuated as erasure of the 'name of the mother', or the “silent engine” (1) behind the vanishing process causing a persistent depletion of women's contribution to culture. *Accabadora* re-writes and reverses this process.

Through the restructuring power of myth, as heralded by Jacobs, the mother-daughter dyad formed by Bonaria and Maria is no longer a projection of male desires but something as yet unheard of, or, in Irigaray's words, something “yet-to-be”. Following Jacobs' theory, I suggest that Bonaria's death allows her to assume a maternal generative structural function to pass on to her daughter. Matricide, thus, triggers a process that leads to a “symbolisation of potential female genealogies and thus works toward the creation of a sociality, inheritance and transgenerational transmission between women” (Jacobs: 31).

If Sapienza began the transition from The-Law-of-the-Father toward 'the law of the mother', Murgia takes this transition even further. Sapienza located her matricides in a depatrarchalised

context, imagining an alternative symbolic order in which gendered identities are fluid and interchangeable. Murgia's depiction of relationships between women, instead, underlies a framework which, to some extent, seems closer to a matriarchal context.

5. A Sardinian case: "una dominanza pacifica della donna" between matriarchal utopy and patriarchal order

The fact that both the novel and its author are deeply grounded in a Sardinian cultural context is extremely important in the analysis of the socio-symbolic framework underlying *Accabadora*. In fact, some of the cultural and social structures portrayed in the novel are only found in Sardinia, where, for instance, the existence of the *fillus de anima* is well known and widely accepted.[29] The social organisation of the village in which the plot is set has experienced the idea of extended families, if not as a cultural norm, at least as a possible solution to social distress and poverty. In the novel, only one character, Luciana, is sceptical of Bonaria's and Maria's relationship and seems to consider with suspicion the practice of *fillu de anima*. This is not a coincidence, since Luciana, referred to as "continentale" (19) or "la piemontese," (22) is not Sardinian, but from Piedmont. Therefore, Luciana is a "forestiera" (19), although well integrated, who moved to Soreni from Torino after her marriage. Having worked as the primary school teacher of the village for almost thirty years, she has gained the respect and gratitude of most villagers, obtaining "piena legittimazione come cittadina" (19). When Maria enters the primary school, Luciana is informed about the child's status as *fillu de anima*. As the narrator comments, Luciana "aveva accettato di buon grado la strana situazione familiare [di Maria]" (20), thanks to the cultural mediation of her husband. However, her conversation with Bonaria reveals how hard it is for a non-native to understand and accept the bond between the girl and the old woman. Luciana's mistrust, due to her extraneousness to local habits and traditions, acts as a foil to the general acceptance of Maria's status. Everybody else in the village understands the reasons why Teresa has given her daughter to Bonaria and why Bonaria has accepted someone else's child in her house.

Why is Luciana, seemingly the most 'civilised' character of the novel, the only one who shows mistrust towards the status of a *fillus de anima*? What does she stand for? What message is Murgia trying to convey? First and foremost, as a *forestiera* Luciana represents the difficulty of understanding the specific traits of the local culture. However, there is more. In spite of the positive

29 In an interview after receiving the Campiello Prize 2010, Murgia provides more details about the singular practice of *fillus de anima* and its social perception: "La comunità locale sostiene e certifica questo passaggio di patria potestà che però non recide i legami di sangue. Non è un meccanismo facile da capire, perché a noi oggi manca il forte contesto relazionale di co-genitorialità che era proprio delle piccole comunità rurali, dove la solidarietà era l'unica forma di stato sociale possibile. Le cose che per noi oggi sono inaccettabili perché ce le aspettiamo dai servizi sociali allora le faceva il vicinato, lo stretto parentado" (Verrini).

light in which the narrating voice describes Luciana (18-19), and maybe precisely because of it, her attitude in relation to Bonaria is slightly disturbing. Her persistent wariness of the relationship between the old woman and the child stems from abstract rules rather than from the consideration of Maria's primary needs and happiness. Through her firm belief in traditional (and patriarchal) family structures as the only acceptable forms of parenthood, Luciana here functions as an involuntary upholder of patriarchy. Her view is opposed and confronted by Bonaria, who not only embodies a forgotten matriarchal archetype, but also a different idea of motherhood based on volition and choice. While Luciana's static idea of kinship belongs to a patriarchal culture,[30] Bonaria's choice to create a family based on mutual needs rather than on social conventions is grounded outside patriarchal culture. Even their physical description enhances the difference between the two women:

> le due donne si trovarono l'una di fronte all'altra, la maestra vestita con un piccolo tailleur blu pied-de-poule come usavano in città, e la sarta con la sua lunga gonna tradizionale e lo scialle sulle spalle (20).

The author insists on this opposition between Bonaria and Luciana: “Avevano non più di una decina d'anni di differenza, ma sembravano venire da generazioni diverse” (20). Surprisingly, the bearer of an innovative, unconventional idea of family, motherhood and social relationship is not the younger and more educated of the two women. The blond, charming and elegantly dressed Luciana represents a conservative vision of society in spite of her belonging to the most developed area of the country. Conversely, the old-looking, traditionally-dressed and poorly educated Bonaria introduces a pattern of parenthood that, according to patriarchal logic, is socially and culturally disruptive.

Maria, too, is bemused and misled when she faces the two opposite maternal models embodied by Bonaria and Luciana. In fact, her dream of a different life (“un'altra vita”) under the protective wing of her patriarchal mother Luciana turns into a personal defeat. On the contrary, Maria's return to her origin and to her non patriarchal mother Bonaria, initially depicted as a defeat, leads to the acknowledgement of her mother and to the conquest of her own identity as a woman.

By forming a family of their own Maria and Bonaria perform an innovation, if not in the Sardinian rural village (where the *fillu the anima* is not a disruptive practice), at least in Italian contemporary literature. In fact, even if it does not yet prefigure an entirely feminine-specific system of kinship, their relationship definitely moves outside a patriarchal paradigm of recognition

30 The interconnectedness of rigid family structures (characterised by women's subordinated position of power) and the onset of patriarchy has been debated among scholars for many decades. An exhaustive account of the debate can be found in S.Phillips, *Beyond the Myths*, 213-60.

and legibility.

Murgia herself explains this apparent paradox:

> Sull'isola da che c'è memoria c'è matriarcato, in una forma di organizzazione sociale tutta imperniata sul ruolo dominante della donna, che riveste funzioni chiave nella gestione dell'economia e della cultura […] È così semplicemente da sempre. In usa società pastorale dove l'uomo sta lontano da casa settimane per consentire la transumanza del bestiame al pascolo, o addirittura mesi per lavorare in miniera […] è perfettamente normale che la donna abbia assunto compiti […] come la gestione completa dell'economia, dell'educazione e dell'organizzazione politica e giuridica del mondo affidatole, casa, terreno o regno che sia (2011:173).

In the light of the fact that Sardinia is believed to have had a matriarchal organisation,[31] the traces of which are still recognisable in the power structure and in the process of decision making within the family, Bonaria's de-patriarchalised attitude is not surprising.

The uncommon position of power held by women in traditional Sardinian society[32] partly accounts for the lack of balance between men's and women's agency in the novel. Women's pivotal role in weaving social relations, including the decision about giving away/adopting a *fillu de anima*, and the preeminence of female power in the novel, is a reflection of this particular aspect of the Sardinian society.[33] On various occasions Murgia validates the hypothesis of a former matriarchal era whose effects are still visible in the society she portrays: “In Sardegna il matriarcato è una cosa seria perché comunque il ruolo di dar coesione alla comunità è delle donne e non degli uomini, nel contesto in cui scrivo” (Piccone).

In spite of Murgia's unshakable belief that in Sardinia women did not experience patriarchy as heavily as they did elsewhere, it is difficult to assess the extent to which women here enjoy a position of power. At the beginning of the century, Grazia Deledda provided an unflattering portrayal of women's lives in Sardinia[34] in her *Tradizioni Popolari di Sardegna* (1895). Deledda's

31 A few authors have dealt with the alleged existence of a matriarchal society in Sardinia. Besides Murgia's (2011) limited remarks on the role held by women in Sardinian society, Maria Pitzalis Acciaro's research on *matriarcato barbaricino* (1978) offers the best documented analysis of the matriarchal features of Sardinian society. Talking about the village of Orune, where women's position of power is particularly evident, the author states that the woman “è colei che dispone delle cose e anche del frutto del lavoro del marito e dei figli. I figli poi, sono di 'proprietà' della madre. Tant'è vero che se si vuole indicare chi è quello lì, si dice che è il figlio della tale, mai il figlio di quell'uomo” (117-8).

32 See Pitzalis Acciaro, 1978: 114-21 and 156-65.

33 As the author confirms: “In quel contesto l’uomo non ha il ruolo di tessere la comunità. Quelle decisioni le prendevano le donne”. In: Interview with M.Piccone.

34 Deledda's depiction of Sardinian women is characterised by stereotyped images, as the following passage shows: “La donna sarda […] è ignorante e relativamente poco intelligente; ma nella sua naturale inconsapevolezza essa conserva istinti nobili e delicati, ha pensieri di una suprema gentilezza e nella continua oscurità della sua misera

observations do not match Murgia's, and instead reveal a society characterised by the same level of women's exclusion and marginalisation as any other place in Italy. An interesting mediation of Murgia's claim about “una dominanza pacifica della donna” (174) with Deledda's frightening descriptions is offered by Maria Giovanna Piano. In her essay on the role of the mothers in Deledda's novels Piano argues:

> Gli scenari antropologici dei romanzi deleddiani sono scenari agropastorali, dunque patriarcali, eppure è visibile nell'universo deleddiano un ridimensionamento del patriarcato quale cultura dell'asservimento femminile (10).

About the mother, especially, Piano has something very interesting to say: “Stanno dunque le Madri deleddiane al centro, *inaddomesticate* dalla cultura patriarcale, appartengono a se stesse e a partire da sé ordinano la realtà” (101 *emphasis in the original*). These *untamed* mothers are the most evident connection between Deledda's and Murgia's depiction of Sardinian women.[35]

The existence of an ancient matriarchal society spread over the coasts of the Mediterranean sea before the onset of patriarchy is an hypothesis which has given rise to sprawling debate over the last decades among scholars of different disciplines.[36] Firstly theorised by Johann Jakob Bachofen (1861), who found in myth indications of an age characterised by the rule of women,[37] and then widely argued by the renowned scholar Marija Gimbutas through her documented archaeological findings,[38] matriarchal civilisation was characterised by the worship of an all-powerful, divine

esistenza ama e odia come nessun'altra donna della terra” (251).

35 Various Sardinian writers have depicted powerful and authoritative figures of mothers: to name a few, Marcello Fois in *Dura Madre*, Grazia Deledda in many of her novels (see M.G.Piano, 1998), Murgia herself in *Accabadora*, *Viaggio in Sardegna* and *Altre Madri*.

36 The existence of an era of matriarchy between 40,000 years ago and the third millennium BC is an idea profusely debated by scholars and mainly based on the existence of a Mother Goddess widely portrayed in figurines and other archaeological records. This hypothesised matriarchal society was characterised by a more egalitarian gender organisation, if not a dominant female position. However fascinating, this theory falls short of finding unanimous approval among scholars. As Lauren Talalay (2012) maintains in her contribution to an extensive work on women in the ancient world: “It may be impossible to ever prove one way or the other that a Great Goddess existed in prehistory. As the essays that follow suggest, what is more likely is that interpretations of female deities, their intersection with the roles of women in antiquity, and the place of these debates in modern society will be rewritten many times in the future” (10). From “The Mother Goddess in Prehistory: Debates and Perspectives”, in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, edited by Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2012 (7-10).

37 Bachofen was the first scholar who theorised the existence of an ancient matriarchy. In his essay, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). Bachofen suggested the existence of three periods in the ancient Greek civilisation, respectively characterised by promiscuity, mother right and father right. J. J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). On the existence of a matriarchal civilizaton, see also Marija Gimbutas (1974, 1989 and 1991), Christine Downing (1994), and Sharon L. James (2012). I discuss this aspect more in-depth in section 4.

38 Marija Gimbutas extensively discussed the existence of matriarchy and female power in Europe before the onset of patriarchy in her ground-breaking and controversial work *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1974), as well as in her subsequent works, such as *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991). In the posthumous volume *The Living Goddesses* (edited and supplemented by Miriam Robbins Dexter, 1999 s.

female archetype. This female-centred society, in which women held a high importance, was subsequently supplanted by the male-dominated Indo-European people.

Regardless of the extent of the rule of the mother in ancient as well as in contemporary Sardinian society, I focus on the influence and persistence of this female goddess, which is a pivotal element in Gimbutas' findings as well as in all the scholarly discussion on the existence of matriarchy. In fact, the existence of a now forgotten Mother Goddess before the neolithic age proves how the prominence held by female figures (especially somehow dreadful maternal figures) in the novel has far-reaching cultural roots. After the pre-historical Goddess, the progeny of powerful and dreadful female divinities continues during the Roman age, when the goddess Demeter was widely worshipped in Sardinia[39] along with other female Goddesses, such as Diana-Erodiade, the Phaenician Astarte and others. As Murgia (2011) states:

> Nella formazione della concezione paritaria del ruolo della donna in Sardegna deve aver giocato la sua parte anche la matrice religiosa, che fino all'avvento del cristianesimo aveva mantenuto una forte connotazione femminile sia nell'adorazione di specifiche divinità legate alla terra e al concetto di fertilità, sia nell'esercizio del potere religioso vero e proprio [...] (176).

The fictional character of Bonaria is the most recent fictional embodiment of this lineage of powerful, ambiguous and mythical women - and mothers - whose origin dates back to the mother right era and whose history through millennia is like an underground river. For a long period it flows unnoticed, unheeded along its course, but it is bound to re-surface, sooner or later, and have a sweeping, devastating impact on the surrounding landscape.

6. Conclusion

The multiplicity of the maternal figure is a recurrent theme in feminist thought. Hélène Cixous (1976) has argued that the mother is a metaphor: “It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was 'born' to her” (881). This statement is certainly true for most of the female characters of the novels examined in this thesis, and *Accabadora* is no exception.

However the special feature of Murgia's novel is that the multiplication of mothers entails that different maternal tasks are shared among a plurality of women. While the possibility of replacing

Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.) Gimbutas examines the role of goddesses and women's power in various Mediterranean regions, among which Sardinia, before the Bronze Age.

39 See Attilio Mastino, *Storia della Sardegna Antica*, (2005: 260).

the maternal figure is reminiscent of *L'Arte della Gioia* (and, to a minor extent, of *Oltre Babilonia*), *Accabadora* is even more radical in suggesting that each maternal responsibility should be assigned to a different woman. In this fragmentation of the notion of motherhood, the relational function emerges as dominant. In the novel, it is the chosen mother, and not the one assigned by biology, who proves to be essential to the development of the daughter as a woman. However, there is something more.

In Sapienza's novel Modesta, as a daughter, has to replace (and kill) her mothers until she creates a de-patrarchalised context for other women who find a maternal figure in her. Conversely, in Murgia's text an alternative to a male-centred context is already available to the daughter, and the narration is the account of her long journey towards the discovery of this truth. While Modesta's trajectory is vertical, from bottom to top of the social order, Maria carries out a circular journey, made of “andare” and “ritornare”. Through different paths, which lead the protagonists to search for, find and then embody a benevolent maternal figure, both novels provide an uncommon experience of the disarticulation and rearticulation of the mother-daughter bond.

CONCLUSION

In answer to the question: “Come possiamo imparare ad amare la madre?”, literary critic Anna Scacchi (2005) suggests:

> Raccontando le sue storie, anche quando si tratta di trame controverse […] Creando, per tentativi ed errori, il linguaggio per poterle raccontare, queste storie, per non essere costrette ad accettare come vera l'unica storia che ci è stata insegnata, quella che narra che i figli maschi amano la madre e sono da lei riamati, mentre il legame tra madri e figlie è fatto soltanto di conflitti e sopraffazione (20).

Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia have all taken up the suggestion formulated by Scacchi. They have endowed the mother with her own voice, enabling her to recount her own stories. In Scacchi's words, they have created for the mothers “il linguaggio per poter[...] raccontare”. The outcome is that, in spite of the traditional passivity of the mother in mother-daughter narratives, in these novels the maternal perspective is privileged, although never completely severed from the daughter's. Maternal subjectivity emerges as the most remarkable innovation in relation to the mother-daughter trope.

Not only are mothers subjects of narrations, but they also are originators of their own desires. It is precisely this desire that drives them to assume a speaking position as subjects of their own discourse. While mothers have often been represented as objects (in arts and in theories), perhaps idealised or disparaged, but often passive, the four novels I have examined break this pattern. Modesta, the protagonist of *L'Arte della Gioia*, in eliminating her patriarchal mothers who attempted to stifle her desires, affirms her subjectivity. As a mother, she establishes a new genealogy of women based on maternal authority and one that aims at empowering other women. In *Oltre Babilonia*, Maryam and Miranda only become subjects of desire and of their own narrations when, having dismissed their initially passive position, they assume the task of reconstructing their daughters' female genealogy through their accounts of the stories of their family. In *Lo Spazio Bianco*, the protagonist is the already subject of her own desire, but the assumption of a speaking position is consequential to the experience of motherhood. It is her newly acquired condition as a mother that allows Maria to begin her narration, although she also gives voice to a daughterly point of view. Conversely, *Accabadora* does not give voice to either mother or daughter, but the narration

attributes great relevance to the articulation of the maternal. As I have shown in the previous chapters, in the recurrent representation of the process of separating from the mother, the mother's anger or desire is generally erased. In this novel, instead, the mother's perspective is dominant as is her subjectivity. When the matricidal separation occurs, it is due to Bonaria's choice, while Maria accepts and accompanies her mother's guidance and decision. Bonaria, the least verbal of the mothers, is also the one who, better than any other, invents an alternative, bodily language, and creates a long-lasting genealogy that links her to her chosen daughter. In the 30 years that separate Sapienza's from Murgia's novel, the fictional representation of the mother-daughter bond has gradually abandoned the daughter-centred pattern. With *Accabadora*, the trajectory of Italian women's narratives towards a different balance in the mother-daughter dyad finds one of its latest stages.

The emphasis given to maternal subjectivity shapes the way motherhood is perceived. The four novels present motherhood not as a biological given but as a relational function, even when biological mothers and daughters are involved. In Sapienza, temporary mothers take the place of biological mothers when they have to mother daughters. In Parrella, the protagonist replaces the maternal figure with herself as a mother. In Murgia, as in Sapienza, a non-biological mother carries out maternal functions that the biological mother was unable or unwilling to perform. Even in Scego, where the biological bond is not severed, a similar process is at work. Mothers and daughters are depicted in the process of reconstructing a mother-daughter relationship, departing from the dysfunctional bond they had formed because of biology, and choosing to re-tie the broken bond through their words and through their narrations. While biological mothers often work as anti-models (as in Sapienza, Murgia, Parrella), and bloodlines are devalued, the relational aspect of motherhood is privileged as a kind of voluntary bond that removes women from their destiny and transfers them into the realm of subjectivity. Motherhood as a relational function, therefore, enhances the idea of maternal subjectivity.

As already discussed, the traditional psychoanalytical view suggests that the formation of subjectivity takes place through a separation from the maternal figure. This separation can occur in many different ways, most of which evoke the symbolic notion of matricide. For instance, Kristeva declares that “for man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine qua non of our individuation’’ (1989, 27-8). In other words, Kristeva interprets the formation of subjectivity as “a matricidal separation”, where “the paternal figure is necessary as the 'third term' to break up the mother–child dyad and introduce the child into language and social life” (Stone, 119). Given the importance attached to female subjectivity, it is not a coincidence that matricide is a recurrent

element in the selected novels. My analysis began with a matricidal daughter and ended with a matricide committed at the hand of another daughter. Although the matricides committed in *L'Arte della Gioia* and *Accabadora* differ profoundly, I argue that matricide, as a process of subject formation, is a thread that weaves through all four novels, even though it is laden with a variety of meanings from one novel to the other.

Sapienza, Scego, Parella and Murgia explore the same process: in all of their narratives, the separation to achieve subjectivity (from the mother and from the patriarchal mother) is carried out through a "matricidal act". The protagonist of *L'Arte della gioia* has to kill the women who disfigure the noble idea of womanhood she has developed, and matricide is a vital necessity, not only in the interpretation suggested by Kristeva, but literally, in order to allow women to liberate themselves from male-centred domination or from masculinised women. In Scego, a matricidal separation can be seen in the daughters' rejection of, or impossibility to replicate, the mother's model. For different reasons, Mar and Zuhra cannot mirror themselves in their own mothers and are forced to separate from them. The severance caused by this lack of identification is extremely painful. Through the narration, both daughters attempt to renegotiate the maternal bond, and they finally manage to reconstruct it on the ashes of that initial matricidal rejection. Likewise, both mothers undergo a similar process. Miranda and Maryam have to kill the patriarchal mother in themselves as a necessary step in reconstructing their bond with their daughters. Parrella, too, provides an interpretation of the matricidal separation, in that *Lo Spazio Bianco* portrays a woman who violently separates herself from her mother in order to build a different mother-daughter relational pattern with her own child. In Murgia, the matricidal act is an actual murder, but it also represents the daughter's way of accepting the maternal legacy, by assuming the mother's role. While in the first three novels matricidal separation occurs under the sign of patriarchal influences, here matricide is located in an alternative frame of reference. In fact, *Accabadora* presents matricide as continuity with, not severance from, the mother and establishes a female genealogy that defies bloodlines, while endowing the mother with what Jacobs defines as "symbolical fertility" or with "comptetenza simbolica", according to Italian feminists (Muraro, 1991; Giorgio, 1997).

In my reading of the novels discussed, I was struck by the recurrence of certain disruptive elements in the representation of the family: while mothers gain an increasing agency which strengthens their bond with the daughters, what is traditionally understood as family disappears from this horizon. The novels focus on mother-daughter dyads, for there are no siblings or other close relatives who can interrupt or break the dyad. The disarticulation of the traditional idea of family is highlighted by a remarkable absence, that of the father. In the female-dominated contexts depicted by Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia fathers are irrelevant. They are either defective

and unfit for their role: Modesta's father, as well as the father of Modesta's children); dead: Beatrice's father, and the fathers of the protagonists of *Lo Spazio Bianco* and *Accabadora;* or disappeared: Zuhra's, Mar's and Irene's fathers. This disarticulation applies further in *Oltre Babilonia*, where the father has a role in the structure, but has no agency in relation to the formation of subjectivity. Interestingly, this depiction of fathers recalls the features that characterise the mothers portrayed in the narratives of the 1980s and 1990s, where maternal figures were often represented as distracted, absent, distant or unfit. Subverting the maternal image as represented in many narratives, in the novel examined these negative attributes are transferred to fathers. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the irrelevance of the paternal figure increases from one novel to the next. In fact, the elimination of the father from the daughter's horizon is fully achieved in *Accabadora*, a novel in which men are dead even when they are alive, and where a daughter, born after her father's death, finds several mothers along her way, but finds no father to replace that initial void.

In 1992 Elisabeth Wright wrote that "a mother-inclusive feminism might challenge the place of the father as a necessary third term in the process of subject formation", hypothesising that this process "might conceive of development other than as a process of separation from a […] passive, 'good-enough' mother" (253). As I have demonstrated, Sapienza, Scego, Parrella and Murgia have taken on this feminist challenge. The four novels, in fact, trace a journey towards an alternative idea of subject formation where the father plays no a crucial role. The pre-eminence given to the mother-daughter dyad and the absence of a paternal figure break the Oedipal triangle and suggest alternative ways of subject formation. In these novels, in fact, this process occurs through the mediation of a third term that is not male or paternal, but is reminiscent of the inter-subjective space of mutual recognition theorised by Benjamin (1989; 1995).

Since the link between the Oedipus complex and patriarchy has now been extensively argued and acknowledged (Irigaray, 1985 and 1991; Kristeva 1986; Benjamin 1989; and others), the weakening and the absence of the Oedipal triangle in these novels projects mother and daughter into a non-patriarchal dimension. *Accabadora* represents the final stage of this journey, insofar as in this novel the daughter has to deal with powerful mothers, but there is no father at all to influence the formation of a subject. The last observation leads to a question: Is it a necessary condition for the daughter to be fatherless in order to establish a different kind of relationship with the mother? Quoting an unpublished manuscript by film director Francesca Solari, Muraro makes an interesting point in relation to the absence of the father in her investigation of the mother-daughter bond:

> Il padre, bisognava che qualcuno, una donna, lo dimenticasse un momento, per

> cominciare ad accostarsi ai misteri, ai tesori della madre, per riflettere senza il garbuglio di potere e proprietà che si è annodato intorno al fallo (2006: 151).

This statement applies as well to Sapienza's, Scego's, Parrella's and Murgia's texts. Therefore, I argue that in these novels fatherlessness is only a temporary, but necessary, condition for the daughter and the mother to make a transition towards a full reappraisal of the maternal bond.

It has to be noted that, not only fathers, but men are weak figures in the four novels. Does this mean that a female-dominated symbolic order excludes the male? Is a new symbolic horizon emerging in these texts? Through my analysis of the four novels, the development of an alternative frame of reference can be traced. The embryonic stage appears in Sapienza's novel, where patriarchal mothers have to be killed and patriarchal fathers disappear or are rejected in order to make room for a different frame of reference. While Sapienza departs from a symbolical system that depends on patriarchal order, and while she has an open preference for a female-dominated idea of society, she does not reject maleness as a whole, and the symbolic system she redesigns is not exclusively seen as female. *Oltre Babilonia* stages a world fully dominated by women. Having been victims of patriarchy, these mothers and daughters find the strength and the motivation to create a different destiny for themselves. It is by re-tying the broken bond between mothers and daughters that this change can be achieved. This act corresponds to a shift in the symbolic order. In a patriarchal order,

> the mother cannot transmit to her daughter a culturally accessible and respected image of woman, while the daughter can only see her mother […] either as a phallic mother […] or as a castrated mother (Wright 263).

In order to establish a continuity between mother and daughter and validate the maternal figure as carrier of cultural meaning, a different symbolic order is needed and the four female protagonists of *Oltre Babilonia* engage in its construction. In Parrella's novel, Maria has consciously created a de-patriarchalised world for herself, which is secured by the cocoon of isolation she has wrapped around herself and her daughter. However, in this still empty place, there is a glimmer of hope that a different, non-male-centred society is possible, although yet-to-come. In *Accabadora*, the reappraisal of femininity and womanhood in cultural terms occurs through the recovery of ancient female and maternal archetypes. What we are witnessing in these narratives is a gradual evolution toward the dual-subject culture advocated by Irigaray (2000). Sapienza's, Scego's, Parrella's and Murgia's texts dismantle the hegemony of a male-centred system of values and point in the direction of an alternative frame of reference, which is not necessarily part of a binary structure (male versus

female) but of a more articulated horizon. In this perspective, the centrality of women only compensates for the long-lasting exclusion from the symbolic domain that has affected mother-daughter relationships, but it does not actively aim to exclude men, or fathers, from the new horizon that the writers are designing.

Another strikingly recurring aspect of the four novels is that, although in very different ways, they all evoke the notion of marginality. To different extents, geographic, social, cultural, relational marginality characterises the mother-daughter relationships analysed in this thesis. However, geographical marginality is the dominant feature. The novels are set in southern or peripheral Italian regions (Sicilia, Napoli, Sardegna) or are deeply connected to the South of the World (Africa, Latin America). The mothers, particularly, bear the signs of marginality. Yet, it is they who break the traditional mother-daughter plot and introduce new modes of narrations and of symbolisation. Furthermore, the signature style of the mothers is the sound, and sometimes the corporeality, of their voice. As I have shown in the previous chapters, in all the mothers' accounts there is a more or less overt reference to orality. It may present itself though first-person narration, or the story of a woman who has no access to written culture, but traces of orality are interspersed throughout the four novels. This aspect becomes particularly evident when characters are more marginal in relation to a mainstream culture. For instance, Bonaria and Maryam are both illiterate, and therefore excluded from written, male-centred culture, but not from other forms of culture and communication, which prove to be more effective between women. Bonaria and Maryam, in fact, pose the most radical challenge to a male-centred symbolic order that excludes mothers from language and from cultural transmission. Can we draw the conclusion that there is a relationship between geographical marginality and the challenge(s) these novels pose to dominant discourses in representations of the mother-daughter dyad? This could be one of the possible directions for future research.

Two decades ago Hirsch initiated a study of the representation of maternal subjectivity, calling for other explorations of the maternal discourse. Hirsch encouraged theorists and writers to explore women's (and mother's) collusion with patriarchy, while imagining “ways to overcome that collusion” (198). Since then, several scholars and writers have taken up her invitation, as I discussed in Chapter 1. By exploring women's attempts to overcome their exclusion from the dominant culture through literature, my research has added another piece to the already complex puzzle of the relationships between mothers, daughters and narratives. *L'Arte della Gioia*, *Oltre Babilonia*, *Lo Spazio Bianco* and *Accabadora* present the readers with protagonists who challenge that “collusion with patriarchy” and embody powerful ideas of womanhood. As daughters, they still

have to negotiate complexities and intricacies inherent in the relationship between the mother and the maternal role. As mothers, they combine the female capacity to create or nurture life, with an unprecedented affirmation of their selves. As I have demonstrated, through the conscious re-articulation of the maternal bond, both mothers and daughters contribute to the construction of a different representation of women.

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