

Theorizing Women's Transnational Literatures: Shaping New Female Identities in Europe through Writing and Translation

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ABSTRACT

The first section of the paper aims at outlining the specificity of women's critical contributions to transnational literatures and translation debates. Comparative Studies and Translation Studies are undergoing a phase of methodological rethinking and of discussion on disciplinary borders. It is a moment of great change implicit in a new perspective that wants to take into account a 'global' vision on the state of art of these two research areas. This awareness is born from the idea that the canonical division between literary/cultural studies and translation is not acceptable anymore, because translation is nowadays an hermeneutical category important to understand the complexity of the world. A research area that seems to unite this new notion of comparatism and translation is that of "Transnational Literatures/Cultures", where the term 'trans' outlines, not only the passage among cultures, literatures and languages, but also the overcoming of national borders. The second section concentrates on Women scholars' critical writing about "Transnational Feminisms" trying to underline their main issues. The first one is to combine theoretical analysis with political praxis and teaching to establish theories and practices which refute prevalent power structures of patriarchy, empire and globalization. The second issue is to encourage a transdisciplinary methodology and the necessity to find innovative knowledge paradigms and a new terminology. The third issue is the need to highlight the problem of ethics and responsibility.

Keywords: transnational literatures, transnational feminism, innovative paradigms, ethical issues

RESUMEN

La primera sección del artículo aspira a subrayar la especificidad de las contribuciones críticas de las mujeres a las literaturas transnacionales y a los debates sobre traducción. Los Estudios Comparados y los Estudios sobre Traducción están experimentando una fase de redefinición metodológica y de discusión a propósito de las fronteras disciplinares. Es un momento de gran cambio implícito en una nueva perspectiva que aspira a tener en cuenta una visión "global" sobre el estado del arte de estas dos áreas de investigación. Esta concientización nace de la idea de que la división canónica entre estudios literarios/culturales y traducción ya no es más aceptable, porque la traducción es hoy una categoría hermenéutica importante para comprender la complejidad del mundo. Un área de investigación que pareciera unir esta nueva noción de comparatismo y de traducción es la de "Literaturas/Culturas Transnacionales", donde el término "trans" destaca no solo el pasaje entre culturas, literaturas y lenguas, sino también la superación de las fronteras nacionales. La segunda sección está dedicada a la escritura crítica de Mujeres académicas sobre el "Feminismo transnacional" con el propósito de destacar las cuestiones más importantes. La primera es combinar el análisis teórico con la praxis y la enseñanza política para establecer teorías y prácticas que refuten las estructuras de poder predominantes: el patriarcado, el imperio y la globalización. La segunda cuestión es alentar una metodología transdisciplinaria y la necesidad de



encontrar paradigmas de conocimiento innovadores y una nueva terminología. La tercera cuestión es la necesidad de resaltar el problema de la ética y de la responsabilidad.

Palabras clave: literaturas transnacionales, feminismo transnacional, paradigmas innovadores, cuestiones éticas

A Transnational Perspective in Literatures and Translation

In the first section of my paper I would like to outline the specificity of women's critical contributions to transnational literatures and translation debates. As I have already underlined in a European project and a recent critical overview¹, Comparative Studies and Translation Studies are undergoing a phase of methodological rethinking and of discussion on disciplinary borders. It is a moment of great change implicit in a new perspective that wants to take into account a 'global' vision on the state of art of these two research areas. This awareness is born from the idea that the canonical division between literary/cultural studies and translation is not acceptable anymore, because translation is nowadays an hermeneutical category important to understand the complexity of the world. A research area that seems to unite this new notion of comparatism and translation is that of "Transnational Literatures/Cultures", where the term 'trans' outlines, not only the passage among cultures, literatures and languages, but also the overcoming of national borders. Sociologists have pointed out that nation-state category needs to be reconceptualised in the era of globalization. According to William Robinson the "nation-state" must be seen as a "specific social relation inserted into larger structures that may take different, and historically determined, institutional forms" (565). In her book *Sociology of Globalization* (2007) the Dutch sociologist Saskia Sassen studies how global institutions, such as for instance, World Trade organization, intersect with the set of process that occur on the national and local level, in a way that the nation-state is modified. Sassen proposes an analysis through the theory of *re-scaling*: the globalization crosses the various institutions established by the different "nation-states". The various hierarchies do not disappear, but they intersect thanks to the presence of "new scales" which condition and change the old institutions (Benvenuti e Ceserani 70-74).

The crisis of the concept of nation in Literary Studies has eroded the category of national literature while in Translation Studies it has enlarged the same meaning of translation. The new idea of translation permits to investigate complex problems which characterize the contemporary world such as migratory flows, the hybridization among cultures, and a new concept of identity and citizenship. This explains why this new area of research analyses not only migrations of writers within Europe but also from the rest of the world. From this perspective the term 'transnational' recuperates the possibility of exchanges with extra-European countries underlining people's movements and writings about new configurations of geographical and cultural spaces. The transnational perspective permits to re-analyze the global cultural/literary scene not only from an economic or sociological perspective but also a literary and cultural one. On the one hand, Transnational Studies have criticized the homogenization of cultures derived from the capitalist and neoliberal logics and, on the other, they have unveiled the complexity of migratory fluxes and how these have changed the idea of translation

¹ Federici, Eleonora e Fortunati V. "Convergenze e Sinergie tra traduzione e studi comparati: una rassegna critica". *Transpotcross*. "World Literature e Nuovi Media", anno 3, no.1(2013):1-10. Print.

itself. Furthermore, the “Transnational Turn” in Comparative Studies has provoked a critique to Eurocentrism from other perspectives which have enlarged and deepened the scope of Postcolonial Studies in the European context.

Ethics and Politics in Women's Transnational Literatures

In this section I will analyze Women scholars' critical writing about “Transnational Feminisms” trying to underline their main issues. The first one is to combine theoretical analysis with political praxis and teaching, in fact as Silvia Schultermandl has stressed, “ in feminist politics, the ultimate goal is to establish theories and practices which refute prevalent power structures of patriarchy, empire and globalization” (“Transnational Sensibility” 721). They also have tried to unveil the new power dynamics originated by global capitalism “which reposition women's lives through migration, diaspora, transnational labour, and the resulting influence on identity, mobility, family and kinship ties” (267). For these reasons at the beginning of the new millennium Chandra Talpade Mohanty says:

we—feminist scholars and teachers—must respond to the phenomenon of globalization as an urgent site for the recolonization of people, especially in the Two-Thirds World. Globalization colonizes women's as well as men's lives around the world ... Activists and scholars must also identify and revision forms of collective resistance that women, especially, in their different communities enact in their everyday lives. It is their particular exploitation at this time, their potential epistemic privilege, as well as their particular form of *solidarity* that can be the basis for reimagining a liberatory politics for the start of this century. (236)

In a seminal article Grewal and Kaplan (2000) drafted a sort of decalogue on the features of transnational feminism where they are lucidly aware that the relationship between gender and nationhood is so complex that we must avoid oversimplification and generalization:

By paying attention to the interactions between women from different nations, we can understand the nature of what are being called “transnational” relations, i.e. relations across national boundaries. By such a transnational analysis, one can get a quite different picture of the relations of feminism to nationalism. This kind of analysis contradicts the popular belief that feminism exists in an antagonistic relations to nationalism. The complexity of nationalism is that although nationalism and feminism are often opposed, such oppositions cannot be seen simply as resistance to nationalism because often one cannot exist without the other and often one is constructed only through the other. (n.pag)

The second issue is to encourage a transdisciplinary methodology and the necessity to find innovative knowledge paradigms and a new terminology. Women scholars are deeply aware that migratory flows, the new economic and financial situation have determined new issues of discussion after the Postcolonial Studies phase such as for instance the general applicability to and accountability of transnational feminist theory in relation to race-gender nexus and to the new European geopolitical situation. Furthermore, feminist scholars are deeply aware that one of the main danger of transnationalism is its monopolization along “a first/third axis” excluding entire groups of feminists in the so called countries in transition (Schultermandl “Transnational Sensibility in Feminist Theory and Practice” 274. See section “Transnational feminism and the Study of Eastern European Women” 275-277).

The third issue is that we need to highlight the problem of ethics and responsibility. In the Introduction to the volume *Minor Transnationalism* Francoise

Linonnet and Shu-mei Shih underline that in order to study what has been defined as “minor transnationalism” it is necessary to abandon a vertical perspective where a group was hierarchically put in a higher position and to find a transversal perspective. We should not think any longer about binary oppositions such as centre versus periphery but we need to underline the relationships among minor transnationalisms. Today it is urgent to discuss the relationship among different ‘margins’, different ethnic communities: “There is a clear lack of proliferation of relational discourses among different minority groups, a legacy from the colonial ideology of divide and conquer that has historically pitted different ethnic groups against each other. The minor *appears* always mediated by the major in both its social and its psychic means of identification” (2). In this perspective the “transitional space” becomes a fertile ground open to new fruitful potentialities: “The transnational ... can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without the necessary mediation by the centre” (8). In order to describe the new planetary geography (Seyan 5) born by different communities, migratory flows and diasporas the two scholars retrieves the figure of rhizome which encourages the building up of lateral “networks” among minority groups. The new planetary geography is not build up on hierarchy, on a vertical structure that implies the incorporation of a minor community into a major one in order to get citizenship or recognition. For historical reasons the politics of resistance prevailed over solidarity among ethnic communities and it has prevented a politics of “international minority alliances”.

As regards literary and comparative studies this concept of “minority transnationalisms” has questioned not only the monolithic notion of “national literature” but has also provoked a rethinking of the political meaning of “minor literatures” and “minor languages”. Feminist scholars like Azade Seyan and Jasmina Lukic re-discuss the pioneering and stimulating idea of the two French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari that affirm:

minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. ... Minor no longer designates specific literatures but revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature. (18-19)

Jasmina Lukic finds the example of Kafka and that of the black American writers very useful in order to describe the subversive use of language and the existential condition of contemporary migrant writers: “subversion occurs through appropriation of a language which is not one’s own. For Deleuze and Guattari , subversion comes from within the language and the way one uses it” (45).

Women writers and scholars feel responsible for underlining the importance of transnational encounters and dialogues among ethnic communities. It is not an easy task because in order to study minor transnational literatures/cultures we need a transdisciplinary methodology and be aware that transnationalism is not homogeneous but it is characterized by heterogeneity. Women scholars need to re-discuss the paradigms of Western culture and listen with humility to women who have had other experiences and lived different life-stories. This willingness is evident in Susan Stanford Friedman who hopes that women will find not only new transnational theories and methodologies but also open up their archives: “I ask that we widen the archive out of which we theorize about narrative, that is, move outside our comfort zones, engage with narratives and narrative theories from around the world” (24).

The concept of solidarity implies the deep awareness that there exist cultural differences, but without any essentialist definition of them. As Koebena Mercer underlines: "Solidarity does not mean that everyone thinks the same way, it begins when people have the confidence to disagree over issues of fundamental importance precisely because they "care" about constructing common ground" (66). The construction of a common ground implies "a transnational sensibility" which presuppose a new philosophical mode of enquiry

which begins by looking at life in and on borders, yet it goes beyond these inarguably contested subjects. It involves looking at the person who is looking, and can be fruitfully applied to hybridized subjects as well as to those whose identities are presumed to be fixed. As such, this transnational sensibility sees a lack of fixity as simultaneously inevitable and rich in possibility. A transnational sensibility is both a methodology and a mode of enquiry: a way of seeing and deliberately not knowing, a way of living within the spaces between questions and answers. (Stanford Friedman and Schultermandl 5)

For this reason ethics in transnational relationships among women of different geographical and political contexts is very important. The relationship with the Other comes back, even in more complex terms, because migratory flows have stratified and complicated the concepts of ethnicity, race and citizenship: "the fluidity and complexity of our transnational moment, where migration, travel, and diaspora can no longer be clearly distinguished by intention and duration, nor by national citizenship and belongings" (Shu-mei Shih 5). From a methodological point of view what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih tell about "the affect" resulting from the meeting with the other, is very important: "the prominence of affect as a subjective expression of desire, feeling, and emotions in discursive and political encoding of difference" (75).

This has a direct effect on the relationship with the other

The key to transnational communication is the ability and willingness to situate oneself in both ones' position and the other's position, whether on the plane of gender, historical context, or discursive paradigms. [...] The challenge before us is how to imagine and construct a mode of transnational encounter that can be ethical in the Levinasian sense of non reductive consideration of the other, for which the responsibility of the self (be it Chinese or Western) towards the other determines the ethicality of the relationship. (Shu-mei Shih 100)

In discussing ethics' centrality feminist critics refer to certain ideas and enter into a discussion with Levinas, the philosopher who have stressed the supremacy of ethics over philosophy. The concepts of responsibility, of justice and of proximity to the other are taken up by women critics who have underlined how, in dialoguing with women who belong to different political and historical contexts, the attention to the other is central, implying as it does a different way of being. Being responsible means not only to be willing to answer the other, but also to answer for the other in a disinterested inter-relationship. Then talking to the other immediately becomes something more than simply talking, speaking to the other, it becomes seeing otherwise. As Levinas states in his illuminating pages on the iconicity of the face, the word and being aware of the other, speaking and the face are anchored to each other. Answering is becoming responsible, and becoming responsible is to respond. In this sense, and only in this sense speaking becomes dialogue.

Women not only highlight the importance of being humble when approaching the other, but also the willingness they need to have in order to understand the other.

Women, that is, underline how fundamental the new way of relating to the other is, where feelings and the sphere of affection acquire great value. The thought of “how” to relate to the other compels ourselves to open up and thus forces constant and thorough reassessments. The thought of “how” to relate obliges forgotten thoughts to be remembered, and encourages the emergence both of implications and misunderstandings embedded in daily thoughts and actions. In this perspective the thought of “how” does not mean only to know things but to perceive and to feel them that is to practice them with affections. Women critics underline that in the dialogue with women belonging to other cultures it is not sufficient to know them, but they emphasize the importance of *a new ethics*. This is indeed an innovative aspect since by a new ethics they mean not being focused on our self, but a willingness to listen to the other, not to impose our own thought, but to understand it. In fact the concept of proximity relies on feelings which are the fundamental ingredients in order to build up this new dialogue among different feminisms.

If in the past women critics in the dialogue with other feminisms used to stress the concept of “situated knowledge”, nowadays there is an increased attention to ethics and to the sphere of affection. In this sense, the features of the production of feminist thought and its scholarship are re-visited, or better, are re-visioned: it is not enough to know or just to read. But as Levinas underlines the true reading should always presuppose a new mode of being, no longer focussed on itself, but ready to open to the other, to the emergence of other thoughts, other voices, different from its own. Reading must in fact usher in the world of others into my own. Only thus can reading subvert from its very foundations the assumption that the world is one and only thus reading will not limit itself to an exterior and functional relationship. Women scholars refer to Levinas’s thought because the other is never reduced to a mere object of knowledge and subjectivity is defined in terms of the heteronomy present in the other. They underline and stress the importance of a dialogue that takes into consideration the history of colonization and imperialism and the political-social spaces where it takes place. Only in this way we can think about a transnational politics based on interaction, communication and representation. The importance on ethics of the behaviour we should assume towards the other can make women aware that one of the limits in this dialogue and exchange is to adopt “a monistic perspectival narrowness in scholarship” (Shu-mei 101). Women propose a “transversal and transpositional politics” where to be ethical is able to shift position to those of the other and many others beyond the binary logic of First World hegemony and Third World nationalism. This politics is sustained by the idea that the Third World should have a predominant role in the political, social and cultural transformation of the world.

Many scholars have affirmed that after the dreadful tragedy of 9/11 a new phase was entered, in which, contrary to the tenets of postmodernism, a new narrative, marked by a sense of responsibility prevails. After 9/11 a certain kind of postmodernism with its jocular manner, its ostentatious irresponsibility, its deconstructive frenzy suddenly appeared frivolous against the enormity and terrible novelty of this tragedy (Ascari 5-37; Burn). A “new era” has emerged focused on the concept of responsibility. This is why ‘a narrative of responsibility’ has emerged. With this term, as Maurizio Ascari affirms, we do not want to identify a literary genre but rather a trend whose specificity consists of its performative dimension. The relationship that this type of narrative sets up between the author and the reader requires them to answer both cognitively and emotionally to the ethical and aesthetic complexity it lays down. These “narratives of responsibility” offer a significant reading model in the era of globalization because they explore conflicts and traumas. They underline the importance not just of literature, but

also of language as a tool for understanding, an instrument of mutual understanding, atonement and reconciliation. They also furnish the reader priceless psychological tools to relate to the other, suggesting we have to keep the boundaries of our ego permeable and flexible. Finally, they suggest each and every one of us must play an active role in the establishment of ethical values in our contemporary society.

Another central concept in women's criticism is that literature in a period where the logic of capitalism prevails can become the place where ethical values are produced. Literature against the logic of global financial capitalism and American pragmatism (Palumbo-Liu 41-73). From this perspective what Azade Seyhan, following the line of Appadurai (1996) affirms in her introduction to the volume *Writing outside the Nation* becomes central: that literature and imagination are fundamental tools to understand "displacement, disorientation and agency in the contemporary world" (7, 10). Writings by migrant women become testimony, because through autobiographical forms (life-narratives) women talk about feelings, experiences in exile and new lives in another country.

Women critics have thus spotlighted the important function of literature as a trigger to our imagination, opening us to alternative worldviews. "Narratives of responsibility" often take the form of life-narratives, of autobiographies, because these are a useful documentation to explain the complexity of our current situation, characterised not only by rapid evolution, but also by a new geographical configuration, where the European space is marked by a proliferation of micro-contact zones between intra and extra-European cultures that have been brought into contact by migration. These narratives recount the present by means of the memory because without memory there is neither identity nor future. This is true not only on the individual level, but also on the collective one, since controversial, divided memories—those of people who have experienced a conflict from opposite sides—risk replicating, if they have not been elaborated, the vicious circle of destruction. The importance of "the narrative of responsibility" also foregrounds the important role played by emotions at the cognitive level and their impact at an ethical level.² As Rosalia Baena underlines, life writings follow a complex dynamic of cultural production: "where aesthetic concerns and the choice and manipulation of form serve as signifying aspects to experiences and subjectivities" (vii). Autobiographical writing are forms of identity construction and negotiate 'transculturality'.

Exiled in Language: Identity, Dislocation and Nostalgia in Ornella Vorpsi and Lilia Bicec

The two case-studies chosen are Ornella Vorpsi and Lilia Bicec, two migrant writers who have left their countries, Albania and Moldova, which are geographically near Italy but quite unknown for the Italian reader. They have migrated for different reasons, the first for the political regime, the second for economic problems. Both have chosen to write their novels in Italian and are two emblematic examples of women's transnational literature. In their novels transnational themes such as identity, dislocation and nostalgia acquire different nuances in relation with their cultural and historical background. Ornella Vorpsi was born in Tirana in 1968 when the regime of Enver

² Drawing on her own experience, Martha Nussbaum describes the death of her mother in a New York hospital, while she was lecturing in Dublin, This news caused Nussbaum a crushing grief and a deep sense of guilt due to her absence from her mother's death bed. This autobiographical passage marks the beginning of the reappraisal of emotions as a fundamental factor in our lives and as a guiding light that direct our ethical judgements. Nussbaum, M. *The Upheavals of Thought: the Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Hoxha became more and more harsh. Ornela choosed to write her novels in Italian. She is a writer but also a photographer. She left Albania for political reasons and studied at the Academia di Brera and later in Paris, where she lives now. Her writing can be defined as “a gift of migration”, the result of an inspiration strictly linked to it. Ornella Vorpsi can be considered an “ex-centric writer” in the etymological meaning of the adjective: being and feeling to be outside the consolidate norm that consider the Western world as the centre—both geographical and cultural—as regards the country of origin. Her ex-centricity is born from migration, from her continuous movement from one place to another with the consequent change of her point of view: “Travel makes people to hope that they will find in another country, another climate, and another language what they lack in the place where they are born... Because freedom is always somewhere else. Until this place becomes your homeland. Then the travel towards the elsewhere that does not exist begins again”³ (Vorpsi 2007, 7-8).

Migration implies a detachment from the country of origin and the search for a new personal balance between your motherland and your new identity that in many cases is forbidden since the people, the ‘true inhabitants’ of this place refuse to accept or give a possibility to migrants, ‘new people’ that remain in a kind of limbo. Ornella feels ‘excentric’ in the Western world, in Rome, Milan or Paris, because she is considered ‘different’, weird, someone to avoid but, because of her migrant condition, she feels ex-centric also in the Eastern world. This paradoxical situation is the main theme of Vorpsi’s novel *The Hand you Don’t Bite* (2007)⁴ that narrates a return, not in the motherland Albania, but to Sarajevo, in the Balkans, to the geographical area of belonging. Ornela Vorpsi feels this double ex-centricity because Albania is in a marginal position as regards both the Balkans and other European countries: “Albania on our shoulders is a burden, often we must explain things: which language do you speak in Albania? ... What was the name of your dictator? I can’t remember the name!... Albanian are terrible! Really cruel people! They push their sisters on the streets!”⁵ (21).

But Albanians are also considered as too much Westernised, sold to an external and foreign ideology:

Now I have become a perfect foreigner. When we become foreigners, we look at the world in a different way from someone who is inside. ... It is like going to a family dinner without participating in it; it is as if there is a cold window in between.... They peer at you, they recognize you, they make you signs so that you can get in and join them, you also see them and reply with the same gestures, but the dinner is over, it is consumed like that. After a while they do not invite you anymore.⁶ (Vorpsi 2007, 19)

The detachment from the motherland permits to look from a critical perspective

³ “Il viaggio spinge le persone a sperare che in un altro paese, in un altro clima, in un’altra lingua troveranno quello che manca là dove sono... Perché la libertà sta sempre dall’altra parte. Finché l’altra parte non diventa la tua dimora. Allora il viaggio verso l’altrove che non esiste ricomincia.” (*La mano che non mordi* 2007, 7-8)

⁴ *La mano che non mordi*

⁵ “l’Albania sulle spalle non è un peso facile, spesso si devono spiegare un sacco di cose: ‘Che lingua si parla in Albania? ... Come si chiamava il vostro dittatore, mi sfugge il nome! ... Tremendi gli albanesi! Che popolo crudele! Hanno messo le loro sorelle sul marciapiede!’”.

⁶ “Ormai sono una perfetta straniera. Quando si è così stranieri, si guarda il tutto in modo diverso da uno che fa parte del dentro. [...] È come recarsi a una cena di famiglia e non poter partecipare ; si frappa una gelida finestra...: loro ti scrutano , ti riconoscono, ti fanno segni perché tu entri e li raggiunga, pure tu li vedi e rispondi con gli stessi gesti, ma la cena si consuma qui, si consuma così. Dopo poco tempo smettono di invitarti...”

the country abandoned for political reasons. Through memories and a child/adolescent's point of view Ornella Vorpsi remembers in *The country where you never die* (2005)⁷ the years of her childhood and adolescence in Albania, a sunny but also violent and hard to live country, dominated by dictatorship's abuses of power. A machist Albania, obsessed by sex; to be a woman in a male chauvinist country relegates her to a marginal position; she is not a man and therefore possesses less rights to be free, to live free. However, she finds herself in the same position also when she goes abroad and where there is the same repetitive stereotype, which has become almost a rule: the Albanian woman as a prostitute: "Mother Theresa, even if she was Albanian, could not save us, because Albanian prostitutes have been more than Saints"⁸ (2007, 67).

In her narratives Vorpsi has underlined the necessity to put a distance (cultural but also geographical) in order to survive her past: "Because I don't know if I make myself clear, but I survive only through distance ... today (you know to live I need to put a distance)"⁹ (2007, 66). Vorpsi's relationship with Albania is ambivalent, of both hate and love. Hate because for her Albania is a country of abuses, injustices and pain that she suffered as a child during her school-time under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxa, a country she left because she could not develop her artistic potentialities under a State art of propaganda. On the other hand, she feels a deep nostalgia for her country, its food, its drinks (raki, Albanian grappa, called salep), a nostalgia that comes upon her when she walks around the shops of rue du Faubourg Saint Denis:

One day wandering through the little shops in Rue du Faubourg Saint Denis where among Polish, Jewish, Turkish and Indians breathing the air I looked for (and sometimes I found) the smell of Albania, I ran across salep which I had completely forgotten. I remembered with nostalgia and tenderness that the infusion of this powder had an exquisite smell, worthy of *One and a Thousand Nights*.¹⁰ (2007, 25)

Her use of the technique of fragment highlights Vorpsi's ex-centricity. Her novels are fragments—almost photographs—(she is a photographer), moments of her life in a non-chronological order of her past, and her country. Since a general perspective from which the individual can look at things is difficult, the fragment is her privileged way to look at reality, but it is also a means to get a stereoscopic vision, which means to look at the same thing from different perspectives thus rendering a twisted and contorted but more complete vision. Her writings seem to be born from a 'click' of the past: they are constructed through visual memories. The narrating voice sees, before she understands what is happening or took already place. Vorpsi adds to this narrative technique the themes of the gothic fairy tale genre in a surreal and absurd atmosphere. In an interview Vorpsi affirms: "I recognize myself in a little process of wonder for the world. An amazement we feel in our childhood and that I still strongly feel".

The title of the first novel *Il paese dove non si muore mai* seems to refer to a fairy tale world, an absurd reality which shapes her characters. It is not magic realism, but a sense of wonder for an extraordinary reality outside of the ordinary, far from what

⁷ *Il paese dove non si muore mai*

⁸ "Madre Teresa, pur essendo albanese, non ci ha potute salvare, perché le prostitute albanesi sono state molto più delle sante"

⁹ "...perché non so se sono chiara, ma sopravvivo solo con e tramite la distanza...oggi(...sai, per vivere ho bisogno di distanza"

¹⁰ "un giorno girando per i negozietti di rue du Faubourg Saint Denis, dove tra polacchi, ebrei, turchi e indiani cerco nell'aria (e a volte trovo) l'odore dell'Albania, mi sono imbattuta nel salep di cui avevo scordato l'esistenza. Con nostalgia e tenerezza mi sono ricordata che l'infusione di questa polvere aveva un delizioso profumo, degno delle *Mille e una notte*".

the reader expects; it is a world where cities are made of smells and flavours and where the past comes back unexpectedly eating a particular food or looking at objects in drawers. It is an excessive reality (according to a connotation that the adjective ex-centric can acquire): it is excessive for the migrant who looks for a reality made of evident things, because having lost her original country she looks for a new one; it is excessive because it is made of excessive characters that in order to survive must be excessive. A deep red seems to colour all her stories (in many cases we are told about little girls' passage from childhood to puberty). This Albania is a black fairy tale where the wolf and Bluebeard have the faces of Albanian men hardened by life and where witches have the faces of cruel teachers.

Ornela Vorpsi's photographs are also ex-centric; they show women, often nudes, displaced from the centre, as if they want to escape. They are never shown frontally, their faces are not visible like in the covers of the two novels here analysed. They are always portrayed in anonymous places and seem to lean against something, a surface, in search for a contact, for stability, for a base, a point of reference, a place to take root. In an interview Vorpsi affirmed: "My characters really love loneliness, they attract through loneliness in order to find a dialogue, girls are backwards so that the reader imagine to make them turn around, to go towards them and see their eyes" (interview in Ravenna). They seek a dialogue as her characters in the novels.

The novel *Miei cari Figli, Vi scrivo*, (*Dear children, I write to you*) that Lilia Bicec published in Italian have the form of letters that Lilia wrote to her children but she never sent to them. Letters she writes to try to find relief from the solitude she feels in Italy, without the children she had to leave behind. In these letters she describes her difficult painful experiences in Italy, when she arrived as an illegal immigrant. Her feeling alien in a country that at first is hostile, since she is there illegally, her difficulty in communicating with others because she cannot speak the language. Lilia is a woman that does not let herself be overwhelmed, because she has decided to build another life for herself and her children. This is why, once a job has been found, she starts studying again, teaches herself Italian, and above all, reads in her free time. She reads and writes to her children and tells them the story of their grandparents who endured the dreadful deportation to Siberia when the Russian ruled in Moldova. In these letters we are made acquainted with Moldova's history, practically unknown to the Italian public, which is important to understand the current situation of this country. Lilia Bicec's novel, *Miei Cari Figli Vi scrivo*, is an example of writing as bearing witness which has had therapeutic value for the writer, enabling her to understand how, through her experience of migrating to Italy her identity has changed, has undergone a profound transformation process. Distance has enabled her to understand how her relationship with her husband was not founded on mutual esteem and how, in her case, hard work has meant the possibility of reconstructing herself. This reconstruction has undergone through pain and hard work: a year after their two sons have finally come to Italy, one of her sons was killed when a car ran over him. The pain was immense, but Lilia has survived, has found a new Italian companion, and now she is working in Brescia helping women immigrating from Moldova.

At the beginning we mentioned these books' importance from an ethical and political point of view. Ethical because these are books that show how the prejudices existing in Italy against migrant women arise from ignorance of their culture and their history, in these two cases, that of Albania and Moldova. This ignorance influences our attitude towards them, conditioning the dialogue we have with migrant women. In these two books the central issue is that of identity that is at least double, sometimes multiple, consequently it can be seen as a processual identity, passing through painful

experiences, but which can be subversively remoulded in a strange twist, by writing in a language other than the mother tongue. So, the relationship between mother tongue and the so-called “step-mother language” reveals to be extremely fruitful since the “step-mother changes” and is enriched with the echoes and interferences of the writers’ mother tongue.

Cultural nomadism does not mean the cutting out of our roots of belonging, but rather the idea that by passing through more cultures, identity may be strengthened in order to access the critical capacity of building up a new future.

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